

Zulu Company: The Last Stand

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Summary: The Covenant's invasion has begun. Earth's defenses slowly crumble under the force of their seemingly unstoppable armada. But there is hope. Zulu Company, the Last Spartans, have been training on Earth for years, in secret. And now...it's their turn.

## 1. Introduction

**\*\*Author's Note:** This takes place (mostly) on Earth one year after the events of Halo 2, but starts off eight years before, for a bit of background. After a few chapters showing important scenes, it will jump to the year 2553 and continue from there. If anything in here clashes with any event(s) from Halo 3, assume this is a reality in which Halo 3 has not yet been announced as existing. If nothing clashes...assume it's going on behind-the-scenes.\*\*

\* \* \*

> <p><strong>Introduction:<strong>

The year is 2553; one year after the Prophet of Regret first arrived on Earth, possibly looking for Forerunner installations. Some minor exploration revealed to the Covenant that this was, in fact, the home-world to humankind. When the Earth's military attacked, the Prophet's small fleet was forced to retreat to Delta Halo, destroying the large African city of New Mombassa in the Slip-Space rift left in its ship's departure.

In the year since the Covenant's discovery of Earth, their home, High Charity, has been completely dominated by the Flood. Contact with the Master Chief (stowed away on the Ark) has all but stopped, and the Covenant have gained a significant foothold on the planet. Almost daily, they send smaller ships from deep in space to land near important landmarks and do as much damage as humanly possible.

The MAC Guns orbiting the Earth have kept the Covenant's larger warships at bay, but are unable to target and destroy the smaller

landing-parties. Instead, the Marines are on call every hour of every day, waiting for the next strike. Even while the remaining Elites and a handful of Grunts and Hunters have taken a stand against the Prophets with humankind, their numbers still do not match that of the Covenant armada.

It's been made abundantly clear: the Covenant's full-scale, all-out invasion of Earth has begun, and even in their state of Civil War, Earth's defenses are still incapable of holding them for long. But some hope has survived. A Spartan program has been going on in secret on Earth for almost two decades, and the time for training is almost passed. At the end of a long line of failed experiments lies the small but formidable Zulu Company, the only testament to the true worth of new, but risky, geneological and cybernetic testing. The Master Chief has served as a one-man-army for years, but he is still just that: one man. His efforts in space to bring the war to the Covenant have been very successful, but they have not helped the war at home. Abducted seven years before Regret came to Earth, these new Spartans - these **\*\*last\*\*** Spartans - may be humanity's last stand before extinction.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Note (last seemingly-pointless one for a while): I enjoy constructive criticism and would be glad to hear and respond to some if anyone enjoys this. I have the Intro and three chapters done, so after that, I'll start improvements if given the advice. Thanks all.<strong>

## 2. Chapter 1: Taken

**\*\*Chapter 1: \*\***

**\*\* - Taken - \*\***

**\*\*1400 Hours - \*\*\*\*May 5, 2545\*\***

**\*\*Houston, Texas\*\***

"Come on, kid. Settle down already!" Major Officer John White yelled at the young man he was restraining, with the help of three other officers.

"I have a name," the fifteen-year-old boy yelled as he struggled hard against the men who were dragging him toward a government-marked vehicle. "My name is Ezekiel!"

"Fine, 'Ezekiel,' settle down, or we're going to have to use a sedative, and you do **\*\*not\*\*** want that!" White yelled back.

The boy continued to struggle.

White's patience failed him, and he nodded to one of the officers, who quickly pulled out a syringe and jabbed it deep into the boy's arm. The sedative took effect in seconds, and the boy, while still conscious, lost all will to fight. The officers then hauled him over to their Hummer H12, the closest thing to a tank allowed to drive commercially, and opened the back doors. Another man inside took him and tossed him into one of nine large holding cells. The officer shut

the barred door to the cell and hopped down from the truck.

As the officers got into the vehicle, Officer White looked back at the nine boys who were all in separate cells in the back of the large vehicle. Instantly, he felt ashamed. He and his company were kidnapping teenagers on the government's list of new "Spartans," without giving them any reason or even telling their parents. He didn't blame the boy for struggling, not for one second.

\_Poor kids, \_he thought to himself, \_they never signed up for this, not even close to\_

"Sir," one of the other officers said, bringing the Major back to reality.

"Yeah?"

"That's the last of them." The officer paused, then said in a sigh of relief, "we're done."

"Great," White said sarcastically, "now let's take them to the base. That's twenty-five healthy kids for those scientists to work with, and I'll be damned if I ever agree to do this again." The rest of the officers mumbled in agreement, and the Hummer accelerated away from downtown Houston, Ezekiel's soon-to-be-forgotten home.

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\* \* \*

><strong>

### 3. Chapter 2: The Chosen

\*\*Chapter 2:\*\*

\*\* - The Chosen - \*\*

\*\*2300 Hours - May 5, 2545\*\*

\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Arizona Desert\*\*

"Ohâ€|" Samuel King moaned as he slowly awoke from his sedative-induced slumber. He was sixteen years old, and had been kidnapped from his home in southern Kentucky. Because he struggled, one of his captors had shot him with some kind of powerful sedative, and, unbeknown to him, he'd been driven all the way to Arizona, unconscious.

Now, however, Samuel wasn't in the back of some government-issued van. Instead, he found himself lying on the top bunk of a small, military-style bed. He sat up to look around, but his head throbbed from the sedative, and he lied back down and closed his eyes immediately.

"Ohâ€|" he moaned again, turning his head to one side on his pillow. He really felt like he was going to die on that bed. \_Man, \_ he thought to himself, \_that stuff really packs a punch.\_ He opened one eye, and nearly rolled out of his bed.

There, to his one side, were eleven more bunk-beds and one single bed, with twenty-three young kids, around his age, lying unconscious in them. He saw that, while the kids were all in at least decent physical shape, they came in all shapes and sizes. Some were big, like he was (standing almost six feet tall, Samuel was better than "average" size himself), some were shorter. There were both boys and girls, though Samuel only counted five girls in total. He poked his head over the edge of his bed, and saw there was a boy beneath him as well.

This one was slender. He was a few inches shorter than Samuel, and he was fairly skinny. The boy wasn't to the point that he was "bone," so to speak, but he wasn't very big either. The side of his bunk was engraved, **\*\*Ezekiel\*\* \*\*Veron\*\***.

"Ezekiel," Samuel mumbled the name to himself. He came from a very religious family, and immediately tied it to Biblical terms, meaning "strength of God." \_That's a rare name,\_ Samuel thought, \_if not necessarily the easiest to spell or\_—

"Yes?" the boy beneath him asked calmly. Samuel drew his head back in shock, and smacked it against the wooden railing next to his pillow.

"What?" He asked, rubbing his scalp.

"You said my name." The boy said sharply. "Was there a reason?" he paused as he looked at the side of Samuel's bunk, "Samuel?"

"No," he answered, "I was just thinking about how rare a name that is." The boy looked puzzled.

"The name 'Samuel' isn't exactly main-stream either." He joked, and then turned his head to the rest of the kids. "There are twenty-five of us." He said sharply.

Samuel nodded.

"Call me Zeke, by the way." Ezekiel said. Samuel nodded again, thinking of all the teens lying around him.

\_This is unbelievable,\_ he thought, \_what are we all doing here?\_—

Zeke must've seen the look on his face, because he suddenly sat up in his bed and looked at a door at the far end of the room, a good twelve-feet past the farthest bed. "I think I heard one of the guys who grabbed me say that we're to be soldiers." He said, his face suddenly stern.

Samuel felt his headache coming back. "What?" He said. "I'm sixteen, I'm not exactly 'of age' for the military just yet."

"Yeah," Zeke said with no emotion in his voice, "I'm only fifteen. But on the way here, I heard the word 'Spartan,' a **\*\*lot\*\***."

Samuel nearly fell out of his bunk. "Spartan" was the name of the program initiated several years beforehand that "recruited" several hundred kids. In the program, kids were taken against their wills

from their homes and placed in what was essentially the most difficult "Boot Camp" in history until they were among the best of tacticians and fighters. When they were deemed "ready," they were genetically augmented and became what the human race knew as the "Spartans."

\_Spartans,\_ Samuel wondered as he looked around the room, \_no way.\_

\* \* \*

>Fifteen-year-old Blaine Everson could hear the two boys talking a few beds away from him. Being somewhat of a history "buff" on the Human v. Covenant War, the moment he heard the word "Spartan," he wanted to jump out of his bed and ask this "Ezekiel" kid about what he'd heard. <p>Unfortunately, he too had had to be sedated, and the pain in his head when he tried to move was deafening. So instead, he was forced to lie there, on the bottom bunk of the fifth bed, and listen to everything that was said.<p>

"You think we're actually going to be Spartans?" The boy in the top bunk asked.

\_Samuel?\_ Blaine thought to himself, recalling the name.

"I have no idea." Ezekiel answered. "For all we know, we could all be the victims of a bunch of particularly efficient kidnappers." There was more than just a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Blaine watched as Samuel shook his head. "No," he said, "there's too many of us, and it's all too coordinated. And look around. These bunks are military-style." He glanced around the room, and his eyes met Blaine's. Zeke glanced over too.

"You awake over there?" he asked. Blaine nodded, and the pain in his head flared up again.

"I'm Blaine Everson." He introduced himself calmly, making no indication that the very **\*\*thought\*\*** of speaking was enough to cause a searing pain to penetrate his skull.

"Nice to meet you," Samuel said, "I'm â€"

"Samuel," Blaine said, ignoring the pain, "I know."

"And I'm Zeke." Ezekiel said quickly, not giving Blaine the chance to interrupt him. He struck Blaine as a very sharp, perhaps arrogant, human being.

"Yes," Blaine said, his headache ever-present, "I knew that too."

"Well," another voice came out from behind him, and it sent shockwaves through his already-pulsating skull, "I'm Chris." Blaine turned to look, and found the boy who the voice belonged to was sitting up two beds down from him, in the top bunk. "Actually," the boy said, clearing his throat, "I'm Christopher Strykes."

"Good to meet you." Blaine struggled to maintain a calm smile as his head felt like it would simply explode. He heard Samuel and Zeke

mumble in agreement from behind him. The newcomer started to talk again, but Blaine had had enough. He was ready to either sleep or kill the source of the noise that seemed to be ripping his head open from the inside. Without a word, he lied back down in his bed and was almost instantly unconscious.

\* \* \*

>"Where are you from?" The boy in the bottom bunk asked Chris.  
<p>"New York City," Chris answered, pronouncing the boy's name in his head. <em>Ezekiel,<em> he thought, \_or I could just call him Zeke.\_ He smiled, "Yeah, I'm from the Big Apple." Ezekiel shook his head.

"I'd never make it out there. Too many freaks; not enough circuses." He said. Samuel laughed.

"You're not much for people, are you, Zeke?" He asked. Chris could see it was a rhetorical question, but Zeke sighed and shook his head all the same.

"So," he said, "do either of you know why we're here?" Both Samuel and Zeke shook their heads, almost in unison.

"I heard a guy in the van say the word 'Spartan' a lot," Zeke said, his voice sharp and cynical, "but if that's why we're here, to be trained as Spartans, then I'd say mankind's hope must be running low."

Chris was shocked. \_Spartans! We could be the next ones to take the fight to the Covenant. We could be next in line! \_He closed his eyes and thought about all the stories he'd heard about the Spartans, including the ones of his second-cousin who had, himself, been recruited at an early age.

Then he opened his eyes, and noticed Ezekiel's glare. But it wasn't aimed at him; the boy was looking right past him, almost through him. Samuel was silently staring too.

"What guys," Chris started as he turned to see what they were looking at, "what are we all-"

"Enough talking!" a tall, solidly-built man yelled just as his eyes fixed on the door. Up until that point, Chris had considered himself lucky that his head felt okay, despite being sedated before being kidnapped. And then, in a second, the voice's echo through the room caused him to see spots. Within a few seconds, the pain was blinding.

"Or what?" another voice, a teenager's, asked a few away. Chris could hear loud footsteps from the door getting closer, until the noise of the man's steps were in the same area as the voice had come from. Suddenly, the same voice from a moment before was yelling and screaming in agony.

Chris forced himself to look, and was immediately terrified. The boy who had spoken was considerably under six-feet tall, and the man who had entered, dressed entirely in black, was holding him by his hair, a full foot off the ground.

A half-dozen young voices rang out around the room, yelling for the boy to be put down. "That's enough! Put him down **\*\*now\*\***!" A voice yelled above the rest. Chris recognized the voice as being Samuel's and started to yell too.

Suddenly, the boy kicked his left leg back and caught the man right above the groin. It wasn't enough to disable him, but it did cause him to let go of the teen's hair, after which he fell to the floor, unable to stand on his own legs. A second later, the man was picking him back up, and he threw the boy back into his bed.

"That's what." The man said calmly, making no indication that the kick had done anything more than annoy him. The boy was silent, except for a long, quiet moaning sound he made as he held his head between his palms. The man looked around at all the faces staring at him. When his gaze caught Chris's, he stopped for a moment, as if waiting for Chris to look away. When he didn't, the man's eyes moved on.

\* \* \*

>As soon as the guy who had grabbed him left the room, Landon Brooks could feel the eyes of every other teenager focus in on his body, now shaking on his bed, his head feeling as if it would explode. It wasn't bad enough he'd been taken from his home-sweet-home in Malibu and sedated. No, now he was being tossed around by his shoulder-length locks of brown hair. <p>"Name's Landon," he said loudly. His headache was so bad now that he no longer cared if that <strong>psycho</strong> outside the room heard him. All he cared about was the pain in his skull, how tight he could hold his eyes and ears shut in his hands, and how long it would take some kid a few beds down from him to please shut her mouth.

When no one answered, and even the girl was quiet, he sighed and let his hands fall away from his head in an attempt at sleep.

\* \* \*

>Zeke first looked up at Samuel and then glanced a few beds down the line at a now-conscious Blaine. "Tomorrow," he snapped bitterly, "when the sedative wears off, we're gonna make some <strong>real</strong> trouble for these guys."

Samuel nodded slowly, anger still gripping his features. Blaine only cracked his knuckles.

#### 4. Chapter 3: First Day

**\*\*Chapter 3:\*\***

**\*\* - First Day - \*\***

**\*\*0900 Hours - May 6, 2545\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Arizona Desert\*\***

CRACK!

"What the-" It sounded like gunfire.

CRACK!

Samuel felt something smack into the bottom of the bunk he was lying in and heard Ezekiel moan, then curse, "the Hell-"

CRACK!

"Get up, you slackers!" A low, gruff voice was yelling from the doorway. Samuel sat up in his bunk, then quickly jumped down. He turned to see Zeke slowly getting up, rubbing his forehead.

"Is this guy for real?" Blaine asked. He had managed to get up and walk over to them in the midst of the gunfire. "I mean, look at him, just waving a gun around." He waved his arms around mockingly.

CRACK!

CRACK!

The man started laughing as kids literally fell out of their beds scrambling for cover. "Relax!" he yelled, and everyone quieted, "it shoots blanks." He took the gun and slid it across the middle of the floor—but no one dared to touch it.

"Do you think-" Someone started to ask, but was cut off as the man retrieved another gun from his pocket. Samuel recognized it immediately: an M6D Pistol. A **\*\*real\*\*** M6D Pistol.

"Now this," he said, motioning to the handgun, **\*\*this\*\*** is the real deal. Now, all of you, go through the door in **\*\*single file\*\*** and line up against the outer wall," he paused, then added sharply, **\*\*in single file\*\***."

Without a second thought, all twenty-four teens did exactly that, and Samuel found himself between a very stern-faced Blaine Everson and a very angry Zeke Veron.

\_Joy,\_ he thought,

\* \* \*

> <p>"This is the desert, ladies and gentlemen." The man said as he led them all outside, waving his pistol around nonchalantly. "Welcome home."<p>

Jordan Hawks exchanged nervous glances with the teens to either side of him. One of them, he'd said his name was Ezekiel, had a smug grin on his face. His arms were crossed and his eyes were focused into a glare that could melt steel. The other boy, he had told Jordan his name was Alex. His mouth was agape as he stared into space, looking more than a little frightened.

Beyond each of them, he could see about a dozen buildings, and sand—lots of sand. For miles in all directions, that's all he could make out.

The man began to speak again. "My name is Corporal Charles. You will all address me as such." He paused. "The title 'sir' will also be



acceptable." He smiled widely, then added, with abundant pride, "I'm a Marine."

\_Military?\_ Jordan thought with slight relief, \_so, we weren't \*\*just\*\* \*\*kidnapped\*\*.\_ He looked around to see that Alex had calmed a little, and Ezekiel's grin had widened slightly.

"In addition," Charles continued, "you should all know that we are not \*\*keeping\*\* you here." He motioned around at the multiple buildings and structures that dominated the landscape. "You notice there are no fences, no guards, no moats. However, it's better than fifty-miles that way to the nearest road, and even further to the nearest townâ€|in \*\*any\*\* direction." He was completely still except for when he tilted his head to the right at the words "that way."

"You think any of us could survive a trek like that out here?" Alex whispered to the girl beside him. She shook her head calmly. Jordan silently agreed with her. There was no telling where they were, or how far away the nearest source of \*\*water\*\* was, much less civilization of any kind.

"Now, if any of you would like to leave, now is your chance." The Corporal finished sternly. "Otherwise, you do as you're told."

Jordan glanced around. No one movedâ€|

â€|Except Ezekiel. He took two steps forward and looked at the officer. "And suppose we \*\*don't\*\* agree to what you want?" He paused, arrogance dripping from his tongue. "Sir."

The Corporal stepped silently toward him until they were five feet apart. Then he smiled wickedly. "Thought you'd never ask," he said.

\* \* \*

>Ezekiel was more than a little worried about his predicament. He had hoped his shot at the Marine would provoke him into doing something foolish, or at least get <strong>some</strong> irritated response, but the man acted as if he'd been \*\*waiting\*\* on Ezekiel's comment. \_Stay calm,\_ he told himself, \_no good comes from letting him know you're nervous. Stay calm.\_

He followed Corporal Charles until the man led him to what looked like an enormous dog-cage. "Here we are. In you go." He said, opening a barred door. The moment he did, a dozen Marines nearby drew S2 AM Sniper Rifles to bear and watched the cage from all sides, intently.

After a moment's hesitation, Zeke stepped inside, and heard the gate door slam shut and lock behind him. "This cage is bigger is than my family's garage." Zeke mumbled to himself. The thought of his family tore at him for a moment, causing his eyes to well up, but he forced the tears back and slowly regained his focus. \_This cage isn't for looks,\_ he thought, \_and I'm guessing those Marines aren't either. Tears aren't going to make any difference here.\_

"You remember what a Covenant Elite looks like, right boy?" The

Corporal asked loudly, and with an air of smugness.

Zeke thought it was one of the most ridiculous questions he'd ever heard, but answered anyway. "Yes," he said calmly, "can you remember the last time you took a shower?"

There were giggles and short laughs from the crowd, but they stopped abruptly as an elevator seemed to rise straight out of the ground on the other side of cage, not sixty feet away from Zeke. When it opened, even he couldn't suppress a gasp.

A fully-armored, white, Spec-Ops Elite emerged from the elevator before it dropped back under the ground, its ceiling evening out perfectly with the sand-covered concrete floor. Zeke noticed a Plasma Rifle on the Elite's right hip, and an Energy Sword latched on the other.

The Elite's mandibles spread apart as it snarled menacingly at him. It began slowly taking steps forward. After a few steps, Zeke got a good, nearly-calm look at the creature and realized it was every bit of the eight-and-a-half-feet of terror that it had been described as in Zeke's "War & Tactics" class—the class Zeke had \*\*slept through!\*\*

"What is \*\*this\*\*?" Zeke yelled angrily. "Don't I get a weapon?" The Corporal laughed.

"He won't need them, boy."

"How \*\*comforting\*\*," Zeke growled sarcastically under his breath. As the Elite got closer and closer, he found his options were almost nonexistent. Corporal Charles had done this to make an example out of him, not to challenge him. He was hopelessly outclassed, outgunned, and, to be frank about it, outmatched. "Not funny," he mumbled, looking up at the sky, at Heaven, "not funny at all."

\* \* \*

>"This is wrong!" One girl snapped as the Elite closed the gap between itself and Ezekiel. "Who just sticks a boy in a cage with a monster?"<p><p>

Landon was inclined to agree. No matter what kind of smart remarks he'd made, this was ridiculous. "She's right." He sadly admitted to a new acquaintance beside him, Jason Zant. His other "friend" he'd made, Jordan Hawks, nodded in agreement.

The girl who'd yelled at the Corporal came stomping up to them. "You guys don't think they'd let that...that \*\*thing\*\* kill him, do you?" Landon spoke first.

"Well, I doubt—"

"Ah!" Zeke's voice rang from the cage as the Elite punched him in the stomach half-heartedly. Zeke sprang up and threw a few punches, but against a creature with what seemed like superhuman strength and reflexes, it was pointless. Even when he did connect with one, it hit the beast in its helmet, and Zeke drew back his now-swelling fist in pain.

"He's gonna kill him to teach him a lesson!" The girl said. Suddenly, the Elite drew both arms back before thrusting them both up into Zeke's stomach, causing him to fly back into the bars that made up the wall of the cage. There was a cracking sound as he fell to the concrete.

With that, Landon realized it too. \_He really will kill him, \_he thought angrily, \_or at least make him wish he were dead.\_

\* \* \*

>Zeke hit the ground in a heap, and he felt a bone in his left hand snap as he tried to catch himself on the ground. He got on his knees and his good hand, his breath coming in short gasps. He'd felt a bone in his leg at least crack as well when the Elite hurled him into the wall.<p><p>

Suddenly, as he tried to catch his breath, he felt cold, clawed fingers grip the underside of his chin as the Elite's palm pressed up against his nose and mouth. Before he could even react, the creature had flipped him over its head, and Ezekiel landed flat on his back on the concrete. Shockingly, his body sustained the blow without any broken bones.

But now the Elite was standing in the precise spot to be between him and the door. \_As if that psychotic Corporal would release me anyway.\_ He thought. \_That crazy son of a--

CRACK!

Zeke felt not one, but **\*\*two\*\*** ribs break as the Elite kicked him across the cage, into the bars making up the wall across from the door. In a haze, he slowly, painfully pulled himself up off the ground. \_The longer I lie here, the more he's gonna lay into me with that **\*\*dang\*\*** left foot of his.\_

The Elite got closer until they were less than a foot apart and Ezekiel had to bend his neck to see the creature's snarling mandibles. Then, without warning, it gripped him around the neck and held him high above its head. Zeke could feel his feet dangling four-and-a-half feet off the ground.

He could hear screams from outside the cage, but the Elite's grip got no looser. Even when he could've sworn he heard the Corporal yell "enough!" the beast didn't stop. Finally, when he felt his very life being drained from him, Zeke let his right knee come up with all the effort he could muster. It struck the Elite under the chin and caused it to rear its head straight back, snarling in pain. Even though his knee was bleeding from the sharp point on the Elite's helm, Zeke managed to form his right hand flat, and he chopped the creature's neck with all he had.

The Elite's hand let go immediately, clutching its neck as it dropped Zeke to the floor once more. As his vision returned, he saw the Elite recover. It roared at him with a rage Zeke could almost **\*\*feel\*\*** radiating from it. A second later, the white-armored alien activated its pulsating, blue-white Energy Sword.

Even while the Elite was holding the blade at chest-level, Zeke could feel the white-hot plasma singing his skin from a distance. This

Elite had armor; he had a pair of jean-shorts and a tank-top. \_This is it, \_he reasoned, looking at the Plasma Rifle not two feet away from him, \_might as well try to do as much damage as possible to this miserable pain-in-the-\_

"I said to stop!" The Corporal's voice sounded throughout the area. The Elite turned its head to him before looking back at Zeke, then growled angrily. "Enough!" Corporal Charles yelled again. The Marines standing near the cage cocked their Sniper Rifles, almost in unison. Each one was pointed directly at the Elite.

Ezekiel watched as the Elite slowly, methodically deactivated the blade and stalked away, snarling all the way to the elevator. It rose, opened as the alien stepped in, then shut and descended. The moment the elevator leveled out with the ground, Ezekiel collapsed against the bars.

"Are you gonna make it?" Samuel or Blaine asked laughingly from the other side of the bars right behind him. Zeke couldn't tell which.

He turned toward them painfully and gave his arrogant trademark smirk. "I think I'm gonna like it here." He said calmly.

## 5. Chapter 4: Friendly Competition

**\*\*Chapter 4:\*\***

**\*\* - Friendly Competition - \*\***

**\*\*1300 Hours - May 8, 2545\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Recovery Building - Arizona Desert\*\***

It took two days and the finest medical equipment of the 26th Century, but, finally, Ezekiel Veron was healed and ready to come out of Recovery. The medical examiners had discovered two small fractures in his left hand, one large fissure running half the length of his right femur, and, as Zeke had predicted to them beforehand, two broken ribs.

\_Courtesy of that damn left foot, \_ Zeke thought, rubbing his side as a man in a white coat directed him down a long hallway and out of the "Recovery Building."

He stepped outside and tasted sand as the wind blew at almost twenty miles per hour. His visibility shot, he wandered around the training ground in what he guessed was the direction of the large, dismal-looking structure that he and his fellow Spartan trainees slept in.

Several minutes later, he finally made out the edges of the building and walked around to the huge, cast-iron door.

"Hello?" he yelled, his voice echoing the length of the long hallway in front of him. When no one answered, he called again, and began walking cautiously to the room at the very end of the hall: the bunk-room, where he'd first awakened in this place.

When Zeke got to the end, he opened the door to the bunk-room and peeked inside, but still saw no one.

"Come on," he snapped, "where the heck is everybody?"

And then, with the wind slightly weakening, he heard an all-too-familiar noise: the sound of a cage door slamming shut.

\* \* \*

>"Ugh!" Landon Brooks coughed as his sparring partner, Magnus Daniels, connected his size-eleven sneaker with the boy's stomach. Magnus watched the boy drop to one knee, the wind knocked from his lungs, trying desperately to maintain his composure and regain his breath. <p>"Not too bad," Magnus joked with more than a little arrogance, "but you're not exactly 'Spartan' material." He turned away from his partner to smile back at the crowd that had gathered outside the cage.<p>

And at one brunette in particular: Victoria Small. She was an absolute firecracker, and had beaten all her opponents (including her two \*\*male\*\* opponents) in the last two days. Heck, Magnus thought even he might be a little scared of herâ€¦if he didn't tower over her 5'4" frame. At 5'11" and weighing 180 pounds of muscle, at sixteen years old, there wasn't much of anything Magnus was afraid of.

He walked up to the side of the cage, staring, and stopped just in front of Victoria. The wind was blowing hard, and he had to yell to make himself heard. "Well," he started, "how are you do-"

SMASH!

Magnus realized his mistake the moment he felt a searing pain in his back as Landon planted his boot there with every ounce of force he could muster. And, at 135 pounds himself, it was more than enough to send Magnus' skull slamming into the side of the cage, putting him on the ground, and out of commission for the day.

\* \* \*

>"Not too bad," Jordan Hawks said to himself as Landon dragged Magnus' unconscious form out of the cage. <p>"Not bad at all." He turned to see a broad fifteen-year-old, Christopher Stryker, standing next to Ezekiel Veron. Chris was waiting anxiously for the next two people to be called to spar, while Zeke was wearing his trademark smirk and staring into space.<p>

"Hey Zeke," he blurted out, "long time no see."

Ezekiel frowned. "Yes," he said, "what'd I miss?"

Christopher spoke before Jordan could find the words. "You're lookin' at it." He glanced up at Landon, who had just tossed Magnus onto the ground.

"That's it?" Zeke asked, appearing puzzled.

"Yep," Jordan said, "constant sparring against different people, for eight hours each day." He understood Zeke's confusion. It made little

sense to him too.

"Next!" the Marine supervising the group shouted, "Samuel King and Christopher Stryker, to the cage!"

Jordan watched Chris visibly 'gulp' in his throat, watching Samuel enter the cage, ducking his head to avoid hitting the top of the door.

"Well, Hell," he said, gathering his nerves, "might as well be fighting that Elite Zeke got to be such good friends with."

Ezekiel's scowl deepened. "I'll trade you next time." He growled.

"Whatever," Chris said, leaving them as he approached the cage.

\* \* \*

>Samuel watched his opponent enter the cage, looking more than a little shaky. He didn't blame him, of course. Samuel was no "boy" in terms of size. But, this one, Chris, he was maybe 5'5", and at 165 pounds, Samuel knew he had better than thirty pounds on him.  
<p><em>This won't take long,<em> he thought, \_especially if the wind keeps dying down.\_ He hated the wind, particularly with the sand blowing in his face. It was one more thing to add to a simple concept: fighting.

"Alright," Chris said, getting into a fighting stance, "let's \*\*go\*\*!"

Samuel stood still as Stryker approached him slowly. He waited, and when Christopher finally threw a punch for his face, Samuel raised his right arm like he was flexing, and took the punch with the top-side of his forearm. A second later, his own punch connected with the shorter boy's nose, knocking him to the ground.

\_Well, \_he thought, \_that didn't take-\_

But Chris had already sprung up and threw another punch, this one hitting Samuel square in the chin and knocking him off-balance long enough for his opponent to jump him and bring him down to the ground.

Keeping him there, however, was another matter entirely. Samuel felt Chris' weight on him, trying to keep him pinned, but he simply pressed his palms to his opponent's chest and stretched his arms, effectively \*\*tossing\*\* Christopher a few meters, into the wall of the cage.

Samuel jumped up off the ground, ready, then watched as Christopher tried painfully to pick himself up off the sand-covered floor. He winced as he pulled his head up to look Samuel in the eye.

\* \* \*

>"He'll feel that later." Landon said quietly. He'd dropped Magnus when the boy came to, and then walked over to Zeke and Jordan. Now, Blaine and a girl he hadn't met before, Stephanie Jones, had wandered

over to them as well and were carrying on about the so-called 'fight.' <p>"Well, we seem to be popular," Landon whispered sarcastically as he listened to Stephanie whine about her "fixed" fight with Victoria the day before. Blaine, he could tell, was only barely <strong>pretending</strong> to be listening, his eyes looking right passed her at the two in the cage.

"She **\*\*took\*\*** something yesterday morning, I **\*\*swear\*\***." Stephanie's voice rang out, causing Landon to cringe. Her voice was awful to listen to.

\_Like nails on a freakin' chalkboard,\_ he thought. She kept talking. \_Well, now I know why Victoria shut her up so fast. I might've killed her.\_

"And then, when I finally kicked-" the girl's high-pitched voice stopped abruptly when Zeke's hand snapped over her mouth. She pulled away immediately, but his gesture played its role.

"Take a breath," he snapped, "while I take an Excedrin for the headache you gave me." She glared at him, then stalked away. Even at a distance, Landon could hear her complaining to another girl about Ezekiel, obscenities falling from her mouth like water from a faucet.

Landon was grinning when he saw Zeke turn his way. "Even at reasonable distance," he paused, "she's **\*\*still\*\*** insufferable." Landon felt his grin grow a little larger. He might like having this guy aroundâ€|on occasion, that is.

\* \* \*

>"Next!" the Marine yelled again as Samuel led Christopher out of the cage. The smaller boy was bruised, but not broken. <p>This time.</p>

"Jordan Hawks against Blaine Everson," he yelled. "Both of you, get up here, now!"

Blaine heard his name and walked to the cage door, leaving his friends without a word. He used to be a fighter. Once, he'd had a real temper, and people got hurt when it showed.

\_That's not me anymore,\_ he told himself. \_The Covenant; take out your anger on them. Not here. Not now. Just stand firm. He'll call the match.\_

Blaine watched Jordan walk to the cage. He was holding his head high, but Blaine could tell he was scared. He could **\*\*feel\*\*** it. He led the other, smaller boy into the cage without a word and heard the door slam shut behind them,

The Marine shouted "Go!" and Jordan was moving instantly. For a boy who looked like he'd never fought in his life, he swung hard and fast, making it hard for Blaine to stand there and block all of his shots.

But he did.

When he didn't swing back, even during obvious openings, Jordan

stopped swinging and backed up a few steps, confused. "What's with you?" He asked.

Blaine said nothing.

"Huh?" Jordan asked, emphasizing his question. When Blaine still gave no answer, he could hear voices from the crowd, all calling him "scared" or "small" or "weak".

\_If only they knew.\_ He thought. He heard a few worse, harsher words come into play, and even Jordan appeared to get confident. No, 'confidence' wasn't the right word. He was more than that. With the whole crowd's jeering, he'd grown arrogant.

"Come on, you big girl!" Jordan mocked, still a few feet away. "What's wrong? Daddy never taught you how to throw a punch?"

\_Stay away from that card.\_ He begged silently.

Jordan must have seen the hurt look on his face, because he pushed again, stepping less than a foot away from Blaine. "Uh-oh, did I hit a soft spot? What; was your dad a big girl too?"

That was all it took. He'd brought family into this. It was personal. \_God have mercy on you,\_ he thought, \_'cause I sure as Hell won't.\_

\* \* \*

>Ezekiel had had a talk or two with Blaine while he was in Recovery. He and Samuel were his only visitors for two days, risking getting into trouble to sneak in and see how he was doing. In that time, Zeke heard all about Blaine's physical prowess, his determination and, above all, his temper: a temper to end all others. <p>Now, he could feel the situation going South. <em>Jordan, the fool, he's arrogant because he thinks Blaine is afraid of him.<em> Zeke thought. "No, you fool, he's afraid of what he'll \*\*do\*\* to you." He voiced the rest of his thoughts aloud.

Suddenly, he caught the tail-end of a comment Jordan made involving Blaine's father. He saw the boy's face go stone-cold, his glare hardening into one even Ezekiel would never challenge. Blaine's hands started flexing at his sides.

\_Stop right there,\_ he thought, almost as if Jordan could somehow hear him. \_If you value your body at all, go no further.\_

"Uh-oh, did I hit a soft spot?" Jordan spoke as if he were talking to a toddler, drunk with arrogance. "What; was your dad a big girl too?"

Zeke knew it was over even before the words were finished. Both of Blaine's hands became fists as he shot them into Jordan's stomach with incredible force. As the boy bent forward, clutching his abdomen, Blaine clapped his hands together above his head and brought them straight down into Jordan's back. He fell, face-flat, on the concrete.

But Blaine hadn't finished. As his near-incapacitated opponent raised his head and shoulders up, coughing for sand-free air, Blaine's right



foot caught under the boy's chin, toppling him over backwards.

There, as Jordan painfully struggled to get off his back, Blaine stomped his right foot down onto his chest. Jordan screamed in pain, and Blaine moved his foot to boy's neck and pressed down carefully.

\_Hard enough to shut him up, but not enough force to break the windpipe. \_Zeke thought, sincerely impressed. Blaine was a true fighter.

As Jordan lied on the ground, coughing as he worked for every breath, Blaine finally spoke. "Next time," he said in a low, piercing growl, "you leave my family out of it." Jordan nodded as best he could and, without another word, Blaine removed his foot from his opponent's throat and walked out the now-open gate to the cage.

Zeke heard Landon let out a low whistle behind him. "Note to self," he said, "how 'bout we \*\*don't\*\* piss him off?" Zeke sighed quietly. He didn't know about the wording, but Landon had the premise right: Blaine Everson had just proven, to all of them, that he was not one to be trifled with.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Note: I appreciate the reviews I've gotten and look forward to (hopefully) a few more with this chapter. Through the next few chapters, I intend to do more explaining and character development. I've got them well underway, and will stay busy getting new chapters up ASAP. Thanks again to all who read!<strong>

## 6. Chapter 5: The Program

**\*\*Chapter 5:\*\***

**\*\* - The Program â€œ\*\***

**\*\*0500 Hours - May 20, 2545\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Spartan Barracks\*\***

"It's too early for this crap." Blaine said bitterly, walking slowly out of the bunk-room and into the hall, Landon and Samuel right behind him.

"I agree," Landon said, "it's five in the freakin' morning." He looked down the hall, toward the Marine that was leading the twenty-five Spartans to what he called a "vital informational meeting."

\_There's nothing in the \_\_\*\*world\*\*\_\_ 'vital' enough for me to be getting up at this hour.\_ He thought. \_Unless the Covenant are \_\_\*\*here\*\*\_\_, in which case, we're screwed, I shouldn't even be \_\_\*\*thinking\*\*\_\_ of getting up yet.\_

"Everyone, file in! Take a seat." The Marine yelled from the front of the group. He opened a door and the trainees began to trudge inside. The room was huge, and it looked to Landon like a stage or

auditorium. A large, raised platform at the end opposite the door, with small, metal seats placed in rows a few meters back.

Landon, being only a few spots from the very back of the line, got a seat in the back of the room, and was almost instantly back to sleep.

\* \* \*

>Corporal Charles watched as the twenty-five teens walked slowly into the room and found their seats. He noticed more than a few of them passing out almost the second they sat down, still too tired from the day before to stay awake. <p>"Charles," he turned to see General Irvin Malone, the official in charge of the Spartan Project and its newest part, Zulu Company.<p>

He saluted, his instinct kicking in. "Yes sir?"

The General's face was stone cold. "At ease, Corporal," he said, and the Corporal's arm dropped. Malone continued. "I don't want you revealing anything specific to these kids." He paused. "Not yet, anyway. There's too much history, too many stories. Scaring them won't accomplish anything, except turning them against the ones trying to teach them. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal, sir," the Corporal answered. The General nodded approvingly and walked away without another word.

\_But they \_\_\*\*deserve\*\*\_\_ to know!\_ The thought screamed through the Corporal's mind.

\* \* \*

>"Are they ever gonna get on with this stupid meeting?" Jordan asked bitterly. He too was <strong>not<strong> a morning person.

Samuel shook his head. "I don't know," he said, "but I do wish they'd hurry up. I'm beat." He was slouching so far in his chair that he appeared shorter than those around himâ€|quite a feat for Samuel.

"Amen to that." Jordan agreed. He looked up to the stage to see the Corporal talking with a taller man, dressed in a white suit and blue pants. "Who's that?" He asked. Samuel glanced up from the floor, shrugged, and immediately slouched back down. "Well, you're a lot of help." Jordan said sarcastically.

Samuel only shrugged.

"You know what? This is about-"

"Attention!" the Corporal yelled over all the chatter in the room. "Attention! Everyone sit down and be quiet so we can get you all outside to the sparring-cage! It'll be dawn soon."

At the mention of sparring, everyone quieted. Things had been new and interesting at first, but now the trainees had been at the Training Ground for two weeks, and with everyone having fought everyone else, sparring just wasn't what it used to be. They'd all been told the night before, however, that their sparring routine was going to be

slightly altered.

\_Can't wait,\_ Jordan thought,

\* \* \*

>As soon as everyone quieted, the Corporal began the speech he had prepared for them. "Alright everyone," he said, "this is just going to be a short informational meeting for me to inform you of upcoming days of training you need to be ready for, and to give you a <strong>little<strong> history on this project, and why you're all here."

He glanced at the General at the word 'little,' and continued only after the man nodded to him, silently giving him permission to continue on with what was no-doubt questionable content.

"As some of you may have heard through these past days, this program, the "Spartan III Project," was started eight years ago, in 2537. Counting the twenty-five of you," he said, "it has brought two-hundred teenage lives into the Human v. Covenant War."

As he'd expected, more than a few of the kids turned away from him at those words, no doubt thinking of their own futures, however short they might be. A couple trainees looked intrigued by the idea, including Christopher and Magnus, almost as if they liked that they were chosen. And still a few more remained cold to the entire speech: Victoria, a feisty fifteen-year-old with an overly-strong personality; Samuel, who seemed to let nothing get to him; and, of course, Ezekiel, with his never-faulting, arrogant smirk.

\_They'd do well to be afraid,\_ he thought, watching them. He glanced quickly, from face to face, looking at each of their expressions, trying to find out which ones would take the news the hardest when they were finally told. A few of them turned away or closed their eyes when he got to them, but just as many stared right back with defiance.

"Moving on," the Corporal said, clearing his throat and picking up where he left off. "You should all be informed that you will be subject to **numerous** physical and genealogical augmentations. These alterations to you will include not only standard-issue chemicals given to all Spartans, including growth hormones and neurological implants, but also additional, **new** augmentations that will give you the extra edge you need to finally end our war with the Covenant. You are the new breed of Spartans," he paused, "you are Zulu Company."

\* \* \*

>Ezekiel could feel his muscles twitching, his heart racing, and even his hand flexing almost on its own, at his side. More than once, he'd heard careless Marines in the Recovery Building chit-chatting about these so-called "new" augmentations. These preparations, these "wonders of science," were responsible for the deaths of almost all of the other 175 Spartan III-trainees. In short, <strong>they<strong> were the reason his company's title began with a "Z."

\* \* \*

>The Corporal felt his heart-rate quicken slightly. He'd expected questions, but when Ezekiel's hand shot up from the crowd, he knew immediately that no good would come of it. This one, he <strong>liked</strong> to cause trouble, and he was pretty good at it, regardless of his punishment later.

"Yes?" The Corporal answered reluctantly. \_Here we go\_, he thought.

Ezekiel's smirk faded as a deep scowl took over his features. "These 'augmentations,'" he said, spitting the word out as if it were detestable. "Are these the same ones responsible for the deaths of the **\*last\*** 175 Spartan III's?"

\_Damn it, he thought, how the **\*\*Hell\*\*** does he know about that?\_ He glanced up at the General, who was now wearing a scowl identical to the boy's. Quickly, he planned a new route for his speech and tried to dodge the topic.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about." He lied, his face emotionless and his voice as dry as the desert outside. Whispers came from the crowd, and the twenty-five teens were now all listening intently.

Zeke appeared unimpressed. More whispers erupted from the trainees, their curiosity was sparked, and Charles knew he had to change the topic, lest they find out exactly what the General had forbidden him to reveal.

Desperately, he tried again. "I don't know what you heard, but these augmentations, together with your training, will allow you to face the Covenant both in close-quarters and at varying distances with our assault weapons."

Immediately, heads turned and all eyes were glued to the Corporal. He'd said "Covenant" and "weapon" in the same sentence.

"Yes," he continued, priding himself on his clean escape of the augmentation-topic, "it's our job to make each of you into a one-man-army, unstoppable together, even against the Covenant. In fact-

"But we won't all be **\*\*alive\*\*** for this great battle with the Covenant, will we Corporal?" The boy's voice rang out again; interrupting and throwing the Corporal's speech into reverse once more.

Now angry, Charles answered, "I'm not sure who told you that, Ezekiel, but I can assure you that you either misunderstood them, or they were simply trying to scare you for some fun." He paused, smirking. "Clearly, it worked."

There before him, like magic, the arrogant trouble-maker backed down, lowering his head from its defying height, down to a calm, reasonable stare into space. Charles had figured out a few very important traits of these new Spartans.

Samuel King, while enormous and more than able, hated to fight with a passion. Outside the cage, he never came close to a punch.

Blaine Everson had a temper like no other, and no one, not even the **\*\*Marines\*\***, wanted to be on the receiving end of it.

Magnus Daniels had a **\*\*terrible\*\*** crush on Victoria Smallâ€|one he'd have to be broken of for his own good, and hers.

And finally, to Ezekiel Veron, to be scared was to be **\*\*weak\*\***â€|and there was **\*\*nothing\*\*** worse than being **\*\*weak\*\***.

"I'm not afraid," he said, no longer with arrogance, but almost with an air of respect, "I just want the truth. I think everyone here does, and deserves that much."

At this, the Corporal found himself between a rock and a hard place. He'd wanted the Spartans to know everything from the start, but the General had insisted otherwise. Now, he was doing the impossible and agreeing with Ezekiel. Unsure, he turned to the General, questioning.

Again, General Malone only shook his head. Nothing was to be said today. That was to be reserved for the next meeting.

"Some of what Ezekiel says is not completely without merit," the General said suddenly, breaking the silence. "However, there will be another meeting in six days' time in which the full details of the augmentations and the history of this program will be explained to you." He shot the Corporal a look. "You can finish here, Corporal," he said, walking to the door.

"Yes, sir," Charles said automatically. Then he turned to the trainees. "As some of you have already heard, in the next six days, before the meeting, your sparring routine is going to change dramatically. In addition, Weapons Training begins tomorrow. Your hand-to-hand training won't stop, but will be cut short for various other lessons." He paused, looking around the room. "But, for today, you're all dismissed to the cage."

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Note: Personally, I didn't care for this chapter, and I apologize if it was as boring as I believe it to be. There's information I needed to get introduced, and after a little more sparring and a few more bits and pieces of history, I'm jumping ahead to more important times (like the augmentations you read about), and then, finally, to present day, where things will be much more interesting, I promise. Anyway, as always, I enjoy reviews (thanks to those who left me some), particularly ones that can help me make this story a little more enjoyable for those taking the time to read it. Thanks again for reading.<strong>

## 7. Chapter 6: Teamwork

**\*\*Chapter 6:\*\***

**\*\* - Teamwork â€" \*\***

**\*\*0700 Hours - May 20, 2545\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Sparring Cage\*\***

"Alright kids," a Marine named 'Bruce' said, in his usual, annoying tone. Jason thought he spoke like he was trying to talk to a baby, a dog, or someone with diminished capacity. It was degrading. "Your sparring is going to be just a **\*\*little\*\*** different today."

"Great," Landon Brooks muttered beside him. "Maybe now we'll actually get to **\*\*shoot\*\*** something."

"First up," Bruce said, "Jason Zant and Ezekiel Veron -"

"Oh yeah," Jason said, smirking, "Zeke's **\*\*mine\*\***."

"â€|Versus Magnus Daniels and Victoria Small. All of you: get your asses up to the cage!" He finished.

A dozen voices stuttered the word "huh?" or "what?" all at once. The Marine smiled at the confusion.

"You were warned that your routine would be changing." He said. "From now on, a few times every day, you'll all be sparring with a partner. Now, instead of your usual fights, 'teamwork' is the name of the game."

Jason glanced over to Zeke glaring angrily. When he turned to face him and didn't change his annoyed expression, Jason averted his eyes to see Magnus nearly drooling over his randomly-chosen partner.

\_Well, \_he thought, \_this won't be so tough.\_ He motioned for Zeke to meet him as he walked over to the cage. Reluctantly, the boy stalked over.

"Look," Zeke started, but Jason cut him off as the cage door swung open in front of them.

"No, **\*\*you\*\*** look." He snapped. "You don't like me. I get that. Personally, I'm not a real big fan of yours either. However, this is our new training program. At least for today, deal with it, and I can clean your clock **\*\*next\*\*** time we're in the cage together."

Zeke smirked, then his face returned to its stony expression. He led the way into the cage without a word, and a few moments later, both Magnus and Victoria followed them inside.

"Magnus is mine." Zeke said suddenly as the four of them squared off inside the cage. He smirked. "Think you can handle the little girl **\*\*without\*\*** backup?"

Jason glared at him for a second, but smiled when he came to his own realization: Magnus was **\*\*enormous\*\*** for his age. Zeke was not. If they fought, Mr. Cocky would be having his ass handed to him on a silver platter.

"He's all yours." Jason whispered.

\* \* \*

>"No," Magnus said anxiously, "this won't work." <p>Victoria rolled her eyes, annoyed. The big brute had wanted to fight the larger of

the two boys, Jason, and leave her to mop up that punk Ezekiel. When he realized that they wanted the match-ups to be arranged otherwise, he panicked.<p>

"Quit your worrying!" She snapped. "I'm **\*\*perfectly\*\*** capable of taking care of myself, and I don't think I'll have much of a problem with that big oaf over there." She motioned to Jason calmly.

Victoria was fully aware of Magnus' feelings, specifically those aimed toward her, but one of her most defined traits was her pride. She'd make that proud wannabe, Ezekiel, look like the humblest of dogs on her worst days. \_And besides,\_ she reasoned to herself, \_I've taken on boys just as big as him in the last few weeks.\_ She closed her eyes, readying herself.

"Well, alright," Magnus said, clearly disappointed. She was still deep inside her own head. "But if you have any trouble at all, just call. I'm not too worried about Zeke inflicting a lo-"

SLAM!

She opened her eyes to see that the boy had covered the ground between Magnus and himself and already swung his right leg hard into her partner's kidneys. In addition, Jason was on the move, and was less than five feet away from her.

She cursed herself. How could she not have heard them coming? Was she **\*\*that\*\*** lost in listening to that behemoth, Magnus?

Jason's right hook swung in hard, barely missing her as her knees bent just in time to save her from having her head rolled.

\_So,\_ she thought angrily, \_it's gonna be like that, huh? \_Still crouched, she spun 180 degrees and thrust her back foot hard into the boy's stomach. Jason grunted in pain, but, to her shock, didn't falter. She was so shocked, she forgot to retract her foot in time, and he grabbed it, holding her leg up to his chest-level.

"Cheap shot," he grumbled, pushing her leg forward and causing her to fall hard on the concrete. She felt his footsteps coming closer and sprung back up, her left foot smashing into his thigh. Again, the freak just took it with a grunt and a smile.

\_That's \_\_\*\*it\*\*\_\_,\_ She thought angrily. \_I know a spot that'll bring him down. I don't care \_\_\*\*who\*\*\_\_ he is.\_ With that, she dodged a punch that was so half-hearted she regarded it as nothing more than a joke, pressed closer to him, and raised her knee with all the force she could muster. She felt the shot connect.

And Jason Zant hit his knees.

\* \* \*

>Zeke knew, from the very <strong>start<strong>, that he was **\*\*way\*\*** out of his class.

His weight class, that is.

He was quicker, more agile, and, he believed, much more tactical and

clever than Magnus would ever be, but none of his shots packed enough force to so much as interrupt the other boy's staring at the girl fighting with Jason.

\_He's not paying any attention.\_ Zeke thought bitterly. Magnus hadn't thrown even a single punch since he'd been kicked in the kidney.

"Why don't you watch the fight \*\*at hand\*\*!" Ezekiel yelled, throwing a kick to Magnus' stomach. The boy's arm rose up.

And he blocked it.

Zeke tried again. This time, he threw his knee forward, hoping to get reach his opponent's thigh. Magnus raised his own knee casually, easily blocking Zeke's.

"Alright," Zeke said, furious at his own feeble and futile attempts. "How 'bout you pry your eyes from that irritating little minx over there and \*\*fight me\*\*?"

Magnus turned suddenly, staring him down.

"What did you call her?"

\_Ah, Hell,\_ Zeke thought, \_the girl's the hot-button.\_ He watched Magnus raise his fists up to his chest, right at Ezekiel's eye-level, a look of absolute hatred in his eyes.

"Figures," he muttered, trying to think of a way to fight back before Magnus closed the gap between them and inevitably crushed him to a pulp. "Maybe if I-"

Too late â€" Magnus charged and hoisted Zeke into the air by his neck, holding him with both hands. Ezekiel pushed the older boy's arms with both hands, but they were lodged tight, being held purely by Magnus' rage.

\_Well, this is familiar.\_ Zeke thought. \_Okay, fine. You'll get the exact same treatment I gave lizard-lips.\_ Immediately, Zeke raised his knee hard, thrusting it into the bottom of his opponent's chinâ€|

And he took it. He took it without even flinching. His hands only grew tighter around the younger boy's throat, anger burning brightly in his eyes.

"Temperâ€|temper!" Zeke stuttered angrily, trying desperately to control his breathing and think of a way out. Suddenly, he found himself subconsciously wishing that Jason was the one fighting this giant, or at least come over and help him.

\_No,\_ he thought furiously as he regained his focus, \_that's ludicrous! I don't need his help!\_ He was instantly ashamed he'd thought of it at all.

And then, he got it.

With so little oxygen available to him, and his vision already starting to blur, it took all the energy he had to pull his knees up



to Magnus' forearms, inches from his own face. He could barely make out the older teen looking at him with a puzzled look on his face, before the rage returned to consume him.

In that open second, Ezekiel lashed out with both legs, pressing the heels of his feet hard into the other boy's chest, just below his throat. Even though, as he'd expected, Magnus' adrenaline kept the shot from really **\*\*hurting\*\*** him, it did at least put Ezekiel in a position to remove himself from his death-grip.

His knees were partly bent, and he knew that, no matter how big Magnus was, or how long his arms were, his own legs were longer.

Zeke extended his legs another inch, and felt Magnus' grip loosen around his neck. The monster of a teen wouldn't let go, but Ezekiel found that, at the least, he could breathe. And, over his opponent's grunts and moans of agony in his straining arms and chest, one thought rang out in Ezekiel's mind:

**\_\*\*Pushâ€|Harderâ€|\*\*\_**

\* \* \*

>Victoria simply could not <strong>believe<strong> what she was seeing. The big oaf in front of her, Jason, was slowly standing up from his knees. She'd kicked him, **\*\*hard\*\***, and when she'd tried to hit him as he collapsed to the ground, he'd snatched her foot off the ground and flung her â€" literally **\*\*flung\*\*** her â€" into the side of the cage.

Now, he was back on his feet. \_And he looks \_\_**\*\*pissed.\*\***\_ \_Not that I can really blame him, \_she confessed to herself.

"Now **\*\*that\*\***," he growled bitterly, "**\*\*that\*\*** was a cheap shot." He started walking slowly toward her as she stood up from the floor. "I don't like fighting girls," he continued, "but after that, I'll make an exception."

She tried to think of something, anything, but before she could react, he'd grabbed her under the arms and tossed her high, up into the side of the cage, letting her fall a full six feet to the ground. As she hit, she finally panicked. She couldn't help it. As he reached down again, she heard herself scream.

\* \* \*

>Ezekiel could feel Magnus' grip loosening again. Now, he'd grown bored with actual fighting and was simply testing the older boy, seeing how long his rage and adrenaline would allow him to ignore the pain his body was no doubt <strong>screaming<strong> about inside his head.

And Zeke still had two more inches he could stretch his legs, if he'd wanted to. By now, he believed, the pain Magnus must have been feeling simply **\*\*had\*\*** to be worse than anything he was going through in his legs or neck.

"What'sâ€|" he stuttered, gathering the air as best he could, "What's the matter, Magnus? Yourâ€|your arms sore?" He mocked.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, there was a terrible, blood-curdling scream, and Magnus' grip vanished instantly. Zeke, still pushing, flew back and landed flat, knocking the wind from his lungs.

Magnus turned around and took off for Jason and Victoria. Unfortunately, Jason's back was turned, and only Victoria could see the adrenaline-pumped, rage-fueled monster charging them.

"Ja â€" Jason!" Zeke tried to warn him, tried to yell, but there was still not enough air in his lungs. The words came out in quiet gasps.

Magnus closed the distance, and Jason turned just in time to be tackled by him, sending them both skidding across the concrete floor. In a second, both were pushing and throwing punches as fast as they could manage.

\* \* \*

>Finally, Magnus got up and stepped back, allowing Jason to groggily pick himself up off the floor. He felt like he'd been hit by a truck. <p><em>Make it a <em>\_\*\*semi\*\*\_ he thought. Then another thought penetrated his mind. \_Zeke! You couldn't have \_\*\*warned\*\*\_ me?\_ He looked over and saw his partner trying hard to stand, and failing miserably, and he understood.

"Victoria," Magnus said, turning away from Jason and reaching his hand down to the girl. Jason saw his chance instantly. Before 'Romeo' could even finish his sentence, he planted his foot in the giant's stomach. **\*\*Unlike\*\*** Ezekiel, he **\*\*was\*\*** big enough to bring the gargantuan to his knees with such a shot.

As Magnus doubled-over, Jason grabbed his hair, pulled his head up to chest-level, and hammer-punched him in the face with his right hand. And with that, Magnus Daniels fell, unconscious.

"That's all, folks." He said quietly. He was quite proud of himself for bringing down the strongest of the trainees, even if it was with the help of a major distraction. Suddenly, he was plunged back into reality by yet another scream. When he turned, he saw Victoria on her back on the ground, with Zeke's boot planted firmly on her windpipe, **\*\*exactly\*\*** as Blaine had done when he entered the cage.

"You attacked me from **\*\*behind\*\***!" She spat, struggling for air. Zeke smiled cruelly.

"Should've paid **\*\*more\*\*** attention to the fight at hand, and **\*\*less\*\*** attention to your **\*\*boyfriend\*\*** on the ground over there." He said, motioning to the crippled giant at Jason's feet. The girl's hand came up as she flipped him off, and he dug his boot a little deeper. She coughed once, then let her arm fall.

\_Not too bad,\_ Jason thought, admiring his team's feat. After all, he and that scrawny smart-ass, Ezekiel, had **\*\*somehow\*\*** brought Magnus to the floor.

\_And the girl too, of course,\_ he thought, choosing to omit that part from any future stories he might tell of this particular day. \_Not bad at all.\_

## 8. Chapter 7: Weapons Training

**\*\*Chapter 7:\*\***

**\*\* - Weapons Training â€œ\*\***

**\*\*1500 Hours - May 22, 2545\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Shooting Range\*\***

Christopher watched as the remaining nine Spartans filed into line behind him. This was now their third day of Weapons Training, and it had proved more difficult â€œ and more **\*\*fun\*\*** â€œ each day. Not to mention, almost all of them enjoyed the break from sparring.

The first day had been extremely simple. The Spartans were taught how each of the "Earth" weapons worked, how they were to be held, how many shots a magazine would hold, and what the reload time was that they'd eventually have to beat.

Chris could remember the full list of weapons they'd run through: the M6D Pistol, MA5B Assault Rifle, M90 Pump-Action Shotgun, S2 AM Sniper Rifle, M19 SSM Rocket Launcher, and the typical M9 "Frag" Grenade.

On day two, he and his fellow trainees got some **\*\*real\*\*** target practice. Stryker took to the Rocket Launcher and Assault Rifle immediately. He was hitting a large, man-sized, Elite-shaped target at 30 meters instantly, and his aim improved dramatically in the six hours they spent doing **\*\*nothing\*\*** but shooting and reloading.

Now, however, on day three, he was going to have to step it up a notch, or else find himself out-shot by Landon Brooks for a second time. The day before, Landon had made a **\*\*game\*\*** out of showing everyone that he was a better-than-average shot with a scope, shooting the head off both **\*\*his\*\*** target **\*\*and\*\*** Jason Zant's.

Now, Christ thought as a single Marine approached them, it's **\*\*my\*\*** turn.\_

\* \* \*

>"Alright, suit up!" the Marine in charge yelled as the Spartans finished lining up. As he said it, a dozen Marines dropped large duffel bags at their feet. <p><em>Suit up?<em> Samuel wondered, for \_\_what\_\_ He opened his bag and pulled out a set of Army-style fatigues, camouflaged except for chest, arm and leg-plates colored a bright blue. Reaching his hand back inside, he also pulled out a blue helmet, brand new and with a crystal-clear, flip-down visor in the front.

"What is all this?" Jordan Hawks asked as he pulled out a set of fatigues nearly identical to Samuel's, except that Samuel's were much bigger. The Marine laughed slightly.

"We decided that it'd be best for ya'll to get some **\*\*real\*\*** target practice, out in the field, where your targets will actually fire

back." He paused for effect. "This time, you're not shooting some sorry clay-pigeonsâ€|you're aiming for each other."

Samuel was already off-balance, trying to pull his new fatigues over his shorts, and this comment almost knocked him clean over. "What?" He asked, his voice echoing with two-dozen others.

The Marine's smile faded as his expression turned to one of irritation. "Just **\*\*suit the Hell up\*\***." He said. Within a few minutes, the Spartans were ready, and Samuel noticed **\*\*another\*\*** difference as the Marine began to lead them across the Training Ground: about half of them were clad in bright blue chest, arm, and leg-plates, but the other half were armored in bright red ones.

\_Teams,\_ he thought uncomfortably, searching for other "Blue" members. He immediately noted Jordan Hawks. "One," he said, then saw Ezekiel and Blaine as well. "Three," he counted, then went up to six as he noticed Victoria, Stephanie and a boy he had never really met. The boy's chest-plate read: **\*\*012: Stephen Trell\*\***.

It was only then that he came to two realizations: first, the Spartans had been assigned numbers, and he hadn't even noticed. And two: Zeke, Blaine, and Victoria were the only three people on his team that he really knew anything about. The rest, he either hadn't met at all except in the Cage, or could only just barely put a name to their faces.

The other Spartans must have noticed the colors as well, because they started to slowly walk to their own teams.

"Attention!" the Marine yelled suddenly, stopping them all in their tracks and bringing their hands to their foreheads in salute. Samuel felt the last two weeks as his arm rose up without his even thinking about it.

He risked a glance passed the Marine to see a huge fifteen-foot wall extending a quarter-mile on either side of a giant, ten-foot gate, directly behind the Spartans' overseer.

"Joy," Zeke whispered sarcastically, "this guy brought us to the **\*\*zoo\*\***." Samuel silently agreed as Blaine let out a hushed laugh. With the gate and the walls, it really did look like an old-fashioned zoo.

"Now," the Marine said sternly, "inside these walls is a false environment much resembling a rocky outcrop, like what you would encounter around a beach or the Grand Canyon. It will serve as one of your new Training Grounds."

"False?" Jordan whispered just a little too loud, "what the Hell is **\*\*false\*\*** about rocks in the desert?"

"Good question, Hawks." The Marine snapped bitterly. Jordan was instantly at attention. "This will all no doubt **\*\*look\*\*** natural to you at first, but I can assure you that you will find quite a few things hidden in this shooting-range that are anything but."

He paused long enough to pull another duffel bag off of his shoulder and throw it to the ground, in front of the line of Spartans.

"In this bag are twenty-five sets of gloves. Twelve of them are red. Thirteen are blue. Each one of you is to put a set on, fasten them tight, and then find the button located on the top of the right-hand glove. It's small and white. Find it, and press it."

Samuel reached into the bag after a few trainees had gone, found a large pair, and put them on carefully. He tightened them, and pressed the button on the top. A second later, his blue plates on his clothes lit up brightly, then returned to their normal, dull hue.

"What the-?" he started, but was interrupted.

"By pressing the button, you've just linked your gloves with your armor. If you're shot, it will register in the gloves, and none of the weapons inside will activate in order for you to fire them." He waited for everyone to finish tightening their gloves. "Now, I will escort Red Team around the side of the Arena, to the gate on the far side. Blue Team, when you hear the whistle, enter the gate, and begin."

\* \* \*

>It felt to Blaine like eternity had passed while he stood outside the gate, waiting anxiously. <strong>Finally</strong>, he heard the whistle blow from the other side of the Arena. As the barred gate swung open, he and twelve others ran inside. The moment they were all in, it slammed shut behind them.

Blaine looked around at his teammates. Then he turned to look at the landscape. Sure enough, there were tall boulders littering the place, making for tons of great cover. In addition, there was a rack on the wall where they had entered that was stacked with Assault Rifles and Pistols.

"Well, it's about time." Zeke said, hoisting a rifle from the rack and aiming it at the rocks opposite the wall. He latched it on the back of his blue chest-plate, which had been specially made to hold certain weapons. The rest of Blue Team did the same, and each member was pretty taken with the whole idea that they actually got to **\*\*shoot\*\*** something.

\_This place has to be almost a square mile,\_ Blaine thought, looking around again as he placed a Pistol in the holster on his thigh. He could trace the side walls for quite a ways, but couldn't find the far wall over all the rocks. He grabbed a rifle of his own off the rack and climbed to the top of a small boulder for a better look.

Still, he couldn't see any red armor anywhere.

"Let's get started." Samuel said, taking charge of the group. Blaine waited for someone to protest (particularly Ezekiel), but no one did. Samuel pointed to two male trainees leaning against a boulder, talking. "You two," he said, "you're with Blaine."

The two nodded and came over to Blaine. "Hey John," was Blaine's greeting as the first of the boys arrived. He nodded to the other boy, Will, as he got there.

"Hi Blaine," Will said happily. Blaine couldn't comprehend how this guy could be so damn happy **\*\*all\*\*** the time, including when they were all about to go get shot at, even if it was all just a mock-shootout. Even more, he once got the **\*\*crap\*\*** beaten out of him when he sparred against Christopher, and came out just smiling like a kid on Christmas.

"Alright," Samuel continued, glancing around, "Jordan, Alex and Lauren: you're with me. We're going up through the middle, and we'll take point."

He assigned three more trainees, Ryan, Brianne, and Nathan, to hug the left side of the enclosure. When Samuel turned to Blaine, he knew immediately that the right wall was to be his.

"You're on the right." Samuel said. Blaine nodded calmly.

\_Called it.\_

"Now," Samuel said hurriedly. Blaine thought he was apparently trying to get everyone ready **\*\*before\*\*** Red Team came and shot their sorry asses, "you last threeâ€¦" He paused, then began glancing around and pointing to each individual trainee, counting aloud. He stopped at twelve, and Blaine knew what was going on when he saw him frown, his thoughts evident: \_Where the **\*\*Hell\*\*** is Zeke?\_

\* \* \*

>"Ezekiel!" Samuel said angrily, but quietly. He was still weary of giving their position away to any nearby Red Team members, but he was surprised when a response actually came. <p>"Yeah?" an annoyed voice came out as the boy stood up from behind Ryan and Nathan. He'd been sitting there, toying with the scope on his M6D Pistol, in complete silence. It was unusual â€" so unusual, in fact, that Samuel never once imagined the boy might still be around.<p>

"Never mind," he said, relaxing, "you're with the last three, over there." He pointed to the three remaining boys, none of which he really recognized except for a vague memory of hearing the names printed on their armor.

Zeke nodded.

"You'll cover our backs. As I said, my team will take point." Samuel said, repeating the information both for himself and for the others. He saw everyone nod in agreement, then carefully led the way into the maze of boulders and overhangs.

Quietly, they walked through the densely-packed enclosure, trying to keep a decent idea of where the rest of the team was. For more than five minutes, Samuel neither heard nor saw anything but barren rocks.

"Where are you?" He whispered to himself. It was just then, as he was contemplating, that he heard it: gunfire.

## 9. Chapter 8: The Shootout

**\*\*Chapter 8:\*\***

\*\* - The Shootout   €" \*\*

\*\*1600 Hours - May 22, 2545\*\*

\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Shooting Arena\*\*

There was a burst of automatic gunfire and Jordan hit the dirt out of pure instinct. He heard Alex yell and hit the ground as well. When there was a pause, Jordan stood up, ran back as fast as he could manage, and dove behind a boulder, the sound of more gunfire and dozens of projectiles piercing the air where he'd just been. He crouched low and poked his head out, then back in, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

"Alex Walt of Blue Team," an electronic voice boomed across the battlefield, "you have been hit. Place your weapons on the ground and return to your gate." Jordan watched him silently get up and begin walking back the way they'd come.

Suddenly, two more bursts of gunfire erupted and Alex fell to the ground as he was hit multiple times in the arms, back, and head. He stood back up and took off running for the gate, the other team's hysterical laughter still echoing around the rocks.

Jordan could hear them talking, saying things like "did you see \*\*that\*\*?" or "look at him run!" He poked his head out again long enough to see another boy rise up and level his Assault Rifle at Blue-Team's retired member.

The boy's lips came together and then drew back as he started to yell something along the lines of "watch this," but before a single syllable could leave his mouth, Jordan heard two shots come from behind him and to his right. In a fraction of a second, the boy's helmet and chest-plate were painted blue. The surprise was enough to knock him right off his feet.

"Drew Kensing of Red Team, drop your weapon and report to your gate. You have been hit." The same voice echoed across the area. Drew dropped his weapon and took off on a dead \*\*sprint\*\*, apparently expecting the same kind of treatment he'd been ready to dish out to Alex.

Jordan watched him run straight back, jumping boulders, and he was \*\*almost\*\* out of sight when another 'CRACK!' went off, and the back of his helmet was suddenly dripping blue paint. He tripped, hit the ground hard, then got up and started running again, not stopping until he reached the gate.

"\*\*Coward\*\*!" Zeke's voice echoed through the rocks. Jordan couldn't believe Zeke had hit him at such a range.

Blaine's voice came next. "Mess with the bestâ€|\*\*Die\*\* like the rest!" Quiet laughter could be heard echoing all around their team.

\* \* \*

>Magnus watched the area eagerly. He could hear Zeke's and Blaine's comments, but that didn't matter to him; not now. All that mattered

was blasting that pompous Ezekiel Veron straight back to his big, blue gate. <p>It was true: Jason Zant was the one he <strong>really</strong> wanted vengeance on. After all, he was both the one who hurt Victoria, **\*\*and\*\*** the one who finally brought Magnus down, but fortunately for the boy, he'd been randomly placed on Magnus' team. This meant that, for now, Zeke would just have to do.

\_And trust me, I will get you.\_ He thought, raising his mock S2 Sniper Rifle to his eyes and looking through the scope, surveying the field. As he did so, part of his mind wondered if the other team had a Sniper Rifle or a Shotgun hidden on their side, as his team had. And, if they did, had they found them?

\* \* \*

>CRACK! CRACK! <p>Two shots echoed like thunder through the maze of rocks, and both of Blaine's partners fell clean off the boulders they'd been standing on. He was almost too stunned to realize what was going on, but pure instinct and the red paint on their chests brought his mind back to the shootout.<p>

CRACK!

Another shot roared from the barrel as he dived behind a patch of small boulders. The shot was so close that he felt the wind off it brush his arms.

Then, there was the sound of metal scraping against metal as the unknown shooter reloaded. Blaine could make out Zeke's voice from ten feet away, counting, "one, two, three, four-"

There was loud 'CLICK' as the sniper put the next clip into the gun, finally finished reloading.

\_Alright,\_ he thought, \_it's time to make a move.\_ He took a peek through a small, inch-wide opening between the rocks he was using as cover.

CRACK!

The rifle sounded again, and Blaine both heard and **\*\*felt\*\*** the impact as the red, paint-filled projectile hit the rock only centimeters from the hole he was just looking through.

\_But now I know where you're hiding.\_ He thought, trying to perfectly recall the layout of the area he'd seen for only a split-second. Even in that time, he still recognized the sniper.

It was Magnus Daniels.

Blaine started snapping his fingers to get Zeke's attention. When the boy turned, Blaine mouthed "cover me," and pointed vaguely to the spot where Magnus had been camped out. Ezekiel nodded, bringing his Assault Rifle to bear.

Blaine continued to look at him as he counted down with his fingers. Threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|

The very second he hit "one," the Assault Rifle's automatic fire



started to blare across the battlefield, painting Magnus' cover **\*\*completely\*\*** blue and pinning him down. Blaine brought his rifle to bear as well, and charged, jumping boulders as he ran straight for Magnus.

\* \* \*

>He knew exactly what was going on. Magnus was no fool. He knew he'd been found, and while that insufferable Ezekiel Veron was pounding away at his position, the other one, Blaine, was covering the ground between them in a hurry. To make matters worse, he was all too horribly aware that no one on his team would be standing up to shoot the boy with Ezekiel's damn Assault Rifle blaring. Even over it, however, he could hear the heavy stomp of the teen's footsteps on the rocks, uneven because of the weight he no doubt was carrying in his hands in the form of a mock Assault Rifle. <p>Quickly, he readied himself, gathered his resolve, and lifted his upper body above the rock. He tried his best to aim the rifle quickly at the boy sprinting toward him.<p>

CRACK!

Wide right, and **\*\*way\*\*** off: he was rushing.

CRACK!

A little better: the shot hit a rock off to Blaine's left. Magnus forced himself to calm down. He leveled the rifle, aimedâ€|

CRACK!

This one missed by mere **\*\*inches\*\***, skimming right above the boy's shoulder.

"That's it." He whispered, barely registering the loud clicking of metal as Zeke paused to reload. He stood up further, sighted Blaine directly in the crosshairs, then lowered slightly, aiming for his chest to ensure the hit. He almost laughed as the poor sap leveled his Assault Rifle in his direction.

"Readyâ€|aimâ€|" He said carefully, his finger on the trigger. **\*\*Fire\*\*!**"

CLICK!

Nothing happened.

The gun rattled as Magnus shook it, wondering what could be wrong. "The Hell..." He pulled the trigger again, Blaine still in his sights, and getting closer with every second.

CLICK!

He ducked back down, behind a boulder barely three-feet high, just enough to cover him. It wasn't until that moment that he realized his mistake: he'd fired four shots. He hadn't reloaded after taking his pot-shot at Blaine!

He silently cursed himself for being so stupid and, as fast as he

could, he yanked the spent clip from its chamber.

\* \* \*

>Blaine could hear Magnus reloading the rifle. The screeching noise of metal being scraped against metal echoed around the Arena.  
<p><em>How <em>\_\*\*long\*\*?\_ He wondered. \_How long did Zeke time him at?\_ Then he remembered: four seconds. In his head he counted, still sprinting like a broken track-and-field-runner for the hurdle-sized boulder Magnus was hiding behind.

\_One&#128;|two&#128;|\_He wasn't close enough. He urged his legs to move faster. His stomps against the ground grew louder as he took longer strides, trying to make the distance in time. \_Three&#128;|\_He reached the rock and jumped right as Magnus stood up from behind it. Neither boy had time to register what had happened, and they collided, Blaine's momentum from jumping the rock causing them to roll for several feet.

As he skidded across the uneven ground, Blaine felt his grip on the Assault Rifle loosen, then give way, the gun falling from his hand and coming to rest several feet from him.

\_Too far,\_ he thought, and then watched the Sniper Rifle slip from Magnus as well. Blaine was about to make a dash for his Assault Rifle when he saw Magnus start to reach for the gun on his back.

He wasn't sure, but it looked a lot like a Shotgun. \_Yes,\_ he thought, looking closely, \_he's got a damn \_\_\*\*Shotty!\*\*\_

Instinct took over and, without even thinking, Blaine pulled the Pistol from its holster, leveled it, and fired four shots before Magnus could even bring the beast-of-a-weapon to bear.

He watched as the older boy sat down on the ground, defeated, his mask and chest-plate both colored Royal Blue.

\* \* \*

>Zeke watched Magnus, as well as three other Red Team members, stand up and solemnly start the long walk toward the far gate. The intercom had just made its longest speech, telling all four of them that they "had been hit," and to "return to the gate." In addition, he also watched as two more members of Blue Team, Brianne and Nathan (two of his own partners in this little 'game'), were also sent away, red paint dripping from their arms. <p>Really, he almost couldn't believe how glad he was that Blaine had managed to finish Magnus off. If the hot-tempered trainee had failed, Zeke knew that he'd have had to try to shoot Magnus with only his M6D Pistol, and, even after he'd messed with the scope to get just a <strong>little<strong> more accuracy at longer ranges, there was no way in \*\*Hell\*\* he was going to out-shoot a Sniper Rifle. Either that, or he would have had to try and make that seemingly-suicidal charge that Blaine had \*\*somehow\*\* gotten through untouched.

And Ezekiel was much, \*\*much\*\* too comfortable to do something like that. Perched in a 'tower' of boulders near the right-hand wall, his hands gripping the cool metal of an S2 Sniper Rifle, he was in no mood to go \*\*anywhere\*\*.

Still, he couldn't believe that Blaine had passed up such a weapon. It was lying less than six feet away from where the boy had taken cover from Magnus' own Sniper Rifle. Zeke could only conclude that he somehow hadn't seen it.

But none of that was of any importance anymore. All that mattered was that now Ezekiel had it, and was quite content to sit back and blast any would-be shooters right off their miserable feet when they poked their funny, red-armored bodies out from cover.

"Come on," he whispered as he sighted a Red Team member getting a bit anxious behind his cover. He thought about shooting the guy's leg, but immediately abandoned the thought in favor of better sport. He zoomed in closer, until he could make out letters on the sides of the boy's armor-plating.

Suddenly, there was a flash of blue behind Zeke's target, and the roar of a Shotgun filled the air.

He pulled out of scope, watching two Reds drop their guns and begin slowly walking away. The loudspeakers broadcasted again, and the words "you have been hit" repeated themselves twice more.

"Five left," Zeke said, mentally counting Red Team's losses. However, now he found himself becoming nervous. He saw Samuel emerge from the cover he'd just blasted the two Red Team shooters out of, Shotgun still in hand, walking in Zeke's direction. Zeke turned and could see Blaine making his careful way back toward the group from his suicide-run.

But he couldn't see any red armor anywhere.

"Where?" he questioned, slowly searching the area for anything unusual. He couldn't understand why he felt nervous. He knew that he was perfectly safe where he was. He'd climbed nine feet above most of the rest of the enclosure, and the only opening to his 'tower' he could be shot from was directly behind him.

He knew that his team had Red Team outgunned and, now, outnumbered as well. He knew that, worst-case scenario, he could at least clean up any of the five members left, were they to try and storm the blue side of the area.

Unfortunately, what he **\*\*didn't\*\*** know was that Red Team had found one of the secrets the Marine had talked about. What he **\*\*didn't\*\*** know was that they were crawling like roaches out from the rocks behind him, and those beneath his very feet.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Note: Sorry for the Cliff-Hangers. Really was not trying to do that, but I try to keep the chapters at a semi-consistant word-count. Not only that, this was a good place to leave off this time. If anyone's been paying attention, you know I posted this chapter very quickly after the last one (so as not to torment anyone), and I'll do the same with the next one (which will NOT end the same way, I promise). So, reviews would be great, if anyone feels so inclined. I'd love to see what everyone thinks of the Shooting Range and my "Halo Paintball." I'd have had them use real guns, but, you know...I don't really want to lose any Spartans

yet.<strong>

## 10. Chapter 9: Shot Down

**\*\*Chapter 9:\*\***

**\*\* - Shot Down â€œ\*\***

**\*\*1700 Hours - May 22, 2545\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Shooting Arena\*\***

"I found Zeke," Chris Stryker whispered almost inaudibly to the rest of his team. He'd just poked his head out from the tunnel beneath the battlefield that Red Team had discovered.

Truthfully, the tunnel had been stumbled upon by complete accident when one of their team members fell off his perch and landed with his legs hanging over a large hole in the ground that served as the entrance. The team sent a squad of four: Christopher, Landon, Jason, and another boy Chris barely knew, his chest-plate labeled **\*\*004 â€œ** Matt Sailors**\*\***.

Now, as the four of them slowly emerged in the almost-blinding sunlight, it was clear that taking the dark, cramped tunnel was well worth any discomfort. As the rest of his team's eyes adjusted to the light, Chris watched them work to suppress laughs at just how great a position they'd popped up in.

Ezekiel Veron - cynical, sarcastic, arrogant Ezekiel Veron - was ten feet in front of them, his back turned, looking over the field intently through the scope of an S2 Sniper Rifle. To make things even better, two other Blue Team members, including the appointed "leader" of the team, Samuel King, were standing a few meters off Zeke's left, at ground-level, whispering and facing away from them as well.

—

\* \* \*

>This is bad, <em>Samuel thought as he heard a quiet click of metal behind him. He'd glanced over to see how Zeke's search was going, and the younger boy carefully, almost invisibly, tilted his head behind him, and then pretended to pull the trigger four times.

It had taken Samuel a few seconds to register what he meant, but eventually he caught on: "four enemies, directly behind us."

He'd wanted to turn around, to shoot, to run, to do **\*\*something\*\***, but Zeke shook his head furiously when Samuel's eyes started to wander back behind him.

Now, he'd listened to Zeke and was reduced to standing like a statue, hoping that these Red Team sneaks would make some kind of mistake. To make matters worse, Stephanie, the girl talking quietly to him, didn't have a **\*\*clue\*\*** in the **\*\*world\*\*** what was going on.

"Attention!" The announcement came over the loudspeakers scattered

throughout the Arena. "Corporal Charles has just decided to propose a test to all Spartans left on the battlefield at this time. The test is this: anyone who can successfully take one or more hostages and keep them until the end of the match will be permitted extra rations during dinner tonight."

Samuel barely made out a gasp behind him. \*\*Great,\*\* he thought, hostages, exactly what I'm shaping up to be right now. It took all he had not to turn around and begin blasting.

"How many of them are left?" Stephanie said suddenly, her voice laced with fear. Samuel thought carefully before giving an answer.

"There are only two of them left." He lied, making sure the words were loud enough for Ezekiel and the people behind him to hear them. He glanced at Zeke, but he simply continued to stare through the scope, giving no signal that he'd heard anything at all.

"Oh," she said, starting to calm down, "okay." She looked like she was about to turn around, and Samuel did the only thing he could think of to keep her from triggering a shootout.

"So," he said reluctantly, "your hair looks nice."

She smiled brightly, visibly calming down, and Samuel could feel movement behind him. He silently prayed that his plan was working.

Maybe, he thought, if they think we only know there's two of them, the other two will stay covered to try and keep the element of surprise.

His plan didn't seem to be working, however, as he heard three sets of footsteps tip-toeing behind him. Again, Samuel almost turned around, but his Assault Rifle was at his side; he'd get blown into next week before he even got to **aim** the thing. He felt them get closer, and suddenly he found himself wondering **where** in God's green Earth the **rest** of Blue Team was.

—

\* \* \*

>Almost, *Chris* thought as he walked slowly behind Samuel, almost there. Finally, he found himself only a foot behind the giant, and Matt was just shy of a foot from Ezekiel, up on the 'tower.' Landon carefully walked up behind the girl, Stephanie.

And Jason was waiting, back in the tunnel.

As far as these idiots knew, only two Reds were still in the game, and Chris had elected to leave at least one of them unnoticed, just in case.

He watched his partners for a sign, and then readied himself. When they were all ready, Landon gave the signal, and Chris put his mock M6D Pistol to the back of Samuel's helmet and cocked it loudly. The boy froze as the rest of Christopher's squad made similar threats to the other two.

"Yes!" Matt said from above. "Let's see how many other Spartans can claim that they took hostages!" He had his Assault Rifle pressed deep in Zeke's back.

Suddenly, Zeke burst into laughter. "Taking hostages is a waste of time." He said. "Unless you're using them as bargaining chips, or as human shields, it's about **\*\*asinine\*\*** to take them."

Chris heard Matt scoff bitterly. "Fine," he said, "maybe I should just paint your nice blue suit blood-red." Still, the Blue Team member only laughed.

\* \* \*

>"Go ahead," Zeke said mockingly. "Blast me with your great **<strong>mock</strong> machinegun,**" he paused, then added, "but I'm **\*\*keeping\*\*** the Sniper Rifle."

In truth, Zeke had only wanted to buy some time, speaking just loud enough to hopefully get the attention of someone on his team. But now, he was about to get something better.

"I don't think so!" The boy behind him yelled angrily, poking Zeke harder with the Assault Rifle that now felt like it was crushing his spine. "Turn around nice and slow, and give me the rifle."

Zeke shrugged. "Sure," he said, holding the gun vertically in front of him and starting to turn around. "Just let-"

CRACK! CRACK!

Two shots roared from across the battlefield. The loudspeakers around them came to life. "Steven Clarke of Red Team, you have been hit. Drop your weapon and return to your gate."

"We lost Steven," a voice somewhere on ground-level said quietly. Zeke recognized it as Landon's.

"Damn it," Matt said, turning his head to look at his partners. "Now it really is just us out here."

As he was talking, Zeke watched Samuel make a move. The Blue Team leader ducked his head and swung his arm back, knocking the Pistol from Christopher's hand.

"Wha-" Matt started, but Zeke took the moment to throw the rifle to him. As the boy reached out to catch it, Ezekiel spun on his right leg and thrust his other foot hard into the Red Team shooter's chest. He stumbled and toppled over backward, falling down onto the rocks below him. Even armored and with a helmet, the fall still knocked him unconscious, and Zeke had no doubt that he'd hurt in the morning.

When he turned back, Chris was on the ground with Samuel looming over him and Landon had two Pistols pointed at the Blue Team leader. Stephanie was nowhere to be seen.

"Put them down," Zeke growled. He really wasn't looking for the Red Team shooter to listen to him, but was hoping to get the boy to at least turn his attention away from Samuel.

"Sorry," Landon said sarcastically, "but all bets are now off." Zeke realized immediately what was about to happen and reached for the M6D on his thigh.

Before he could even draw the weapon, Landon had fired the gun in his left hand, hitting Samuel in the forehead, and had already aimed the other at Ezekiel. Chris jumped up as Samuel took cover, now shot and unable to fire back.

Zeke was cocky, but he wasn't stupid. As the loudspeakers said Samuel's name and told him to return to base, he quickly came to grips with the fact that he stood no chance against the two Red Team members—especially not pinned up in his 'tower.' He glanced around, looking for an exit, but could find only one: the opening the two teens were pummeling with their mock Assault Rifles.

When he could think of nothing, he did what was normal: he looked straight up to the sky to tell the heavens how very much **\*\*not\*\*** funny the situation was.

And he saw his way out.

One of his opponents paused to reload, and Zeke gripped an indent in the 'wall' and began to climb. In a few seconds, he was crouched on the top of his makeshift fortress, fifteen feet above the uneven, boulder-strewn ground below him.

"He's on top!" Landon's voice roared behind him and he heard the Assault Rifle go off once more.

"Time to go," he said, and he jumped off.

\* \* \*

>Stephanie watched the battle, and she realized too late that she might have been able to help. She'd run for cover when Samuel pinned Christopher and Landon was watching, stunned. Then, from behind a boulder, she watched Samuel take a shot to the face, and then Ezekiel jumped from his perch. <p>Now, Landon and Chris were walking back down from the 'tower,' guns at their sides. The intercom clicked on for a second time.<p>

"Samuel King of Blue Team, you have been shot. Return to your gate now!" Finally, Samuel stood up, clutching his head, and began walking slowly back to the rest of Blue Team.

And it was at that moment, at that **\*\*second\*\***, that Stephanie chose to take a stand.

"Now it's your turn!" She yelled. She fumbled with her Assault Rifle for a second as she stood up from behind her cover, and then let loose as the two boys jumped back in shock. They tried to bring their own rifles up, but never stood a chance. In a matter of seconds, they were covered in blue blotches and smears.

The intercom made yet another announcement. "Landon Brooks and Christopher Stryker of Blue Team, you have been hit -"

"Yeah, yeah," Landon yelled irritably, "put your guns **\*\*down\*\*** and go

back to the **\*\*damn\*\*** gate. **\*\*We get it\*\***."

Stephanie felt very proud of herself for what she'd done. Never had she fired a gun before that week. Heck, she'd never been in any kind of physical confrontation in her life. Now, she'd somehow finished the battle for her team.

\_Yes,\_ she thought, \_maybe now I can finally get a little respect around this place.\_

The sound of a gun cocking behind her snapped her mind back to reality.

\* \* \*

>The girl turned around at exactly the wrong time. Jason knew that he should've been fully prepared before he emerged from the tunnel, but this was **<strong>Stephanie</strong>**, for God's sake! She was **\*\*useless\*\*** anywhere but at a mirror, doing makeup.

And she was **\*\*beyond\*\*** useless on the battlefield.

Really, he didn't want to shoot her, not at all. She was pretty, and he, for some reason, was completely against shooting a girl. And again, this was **\*\*Stephanie\*\***. She was hardly a threat to him.

But then, she did the unthinkable. She slowly brought her arms up to her chest, leveling her Assault Rifle right at Jason. Now there was no choice.

\_I'm sorry,\_ he thought, reaching for his Pistol. The girl didn't fire. There was a look of fear and shock in her eyes, and it took Jason a moment to realize just how much he'd scared her when he snuck up on her. Just as his fingers brushed the cool grip of his gun, another "CRACK!" roared across the Arena, and it seemed to echo everywhere. The second he heard it, or maybe it was **\*\*before\*\*** he heard it, Jason wasn't sure, the side of his head felt like it had exploded, and he fell over, the pain causing him to see spots and eventually blinding him.

He could barely make out the words as he heard his name over the intercom, and then the words, "Round over!"

\* \* \*

>For a third time today, Stephanie was stunned, frozen on her feet. Jason had just been reaching for his weapon, and she was too shocked to fire her own, when another gun went off to her right, and the side of the boy's head was suddenly bright blue. He collapsed instantly, clutching his skull for dear life. <p>"Jason Zant, you have been shot. The round is over with Blue Team as the victors. Everyone still in the Arena, please report to your respective gates." The intercom made its final announcement.</p>

**\*\*Finally\*\***!" a girl's voice echoed from where the gunshot had come from. Victoria walked out from behind her cover, holding her helmet in one hand and a Sniper Rifle in the other.

"Did you-?" Stephanie started, and Victoria nodded, cutting her off. "You really saved my skin," she said, feeling awkward thinking of how



bitterly she'd treated this girl for the last two weeks, since the day she'd met her.

"Forget about it." Victoria said. "Heck, **\*\*maybe\*\*** you'll return the favor one day."

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Note: Guess what...only a few more chapters, and then I'm up to real-time Covenant-blasting, rocket-wielding, Flood-killing Spartans. Anyway, I hope these three chapters were a good refresher from the sparring. As always, reviews are very much appreciated and (in case I left this part out) I would like a few more. Thanks for reading.<strong>

## 11. Chapter 10: Standard Procedure

**\*\*Author's Note:** I had to edit this chapter. Yes, I hated it THAT much. I actually removed what I had and inserted something (that I hope is) better. So, to enlighten everyone, the time spent in 2545 is over as of the last chapter. This chapter has a short intro (as will all of my major time-gaps), and then jumps right into it in April of 2552.\*\*

**\*\*Before I get to the story, however, I have a review that I wanted to respond to:\*\***

**\*\*Zned51:** Thank you very much for your reviews. This will be brief for time, but, regarding my many characters, I know that I have a lot to keep track of. I hope that it hasn't discouraged too many people from reading. Truthfully, I hate giving them all seperate names when they have no real background, but it doesn't sit well with me to refer to them as "just another Spartan" either. I might have lost my mind somewhere...oh well.\*\*

**\*\*Also,** regarding them "alienating" each other...yes and no. There's some individual differences, like Magnus' want for vengeance against Zeke or Jason, but there's really no "hatred" between anyone. As in real life, each character has a personality, and a preference as to which personalities he or she will be around, but there's nothing horrible in there.\*\*

**\*\*Also,** I promise that things will get easier to follow soon. As most of you have probably caught on to, not all the Spartans will survive augmentation (oh, a spoiler...my bad...), so I'll have less characters for you all to keep track of. I swear, it will get better.\*\*

**\*\*So,** thank you for your reviews (I do not consider them flaming at all), I love a good critique here and there. Also, as a side-note, Zned51: please ignore the part of my message I sent you that makes little to no sense, as I made a MAJOR typo in explaining, and I'll send you another later that's NOT wrong. Sorry about that. It's late, I'm tired. You understand.\*\*

**\*\*Now, onto the story:\*\***

\*\*

\* \* \*

><strong>

**\*\*Almost seven years have passed since the day the trainees of Zulu Company were abducted and taken to the Training Grounds. In that time, they've grown accustomed to every human and Covenant weapon known to them, along with several weapons that surfaced years after they were abducted, including the Covenant Carbine, Particle Beam Rifle, Brute Shot, and Fuel Rod Gun. In addition, no human or Covenant vehicle short of a spaceship are more than minor challenges to pilot.\*\***

**\*\*Between constant sparring and shootouts four times a week, they are skilled warriors both at a range and in personal combat. In time, their attitudes and personalities have been melded to those of a soldier, if not necessarily a Spartan. \*\***

**\*\*Tactically and intellectually, every member of Zulu Company is superior to all but the greatest of minds, thanks to the same classroom regiment Spartan II's were exposed to on the planet Reach (along with a few additions, such as new Covenant troops or weapons). \*\***

**\*\*However, these improvements have not come easily or without sacrifice. Two of the Spartan trainees were lost during mock shootouts like the one held in the Arena in May of 2545, due to chance accidents that resulted in severe spinal damage. With that, there are now twenty-three members of Zulu Company, and a fateful day has arrived.\*\***

**\*\*It is April 25, 2552, and the Spartans are scheduled to undergo the first half of their augmentation, the 'standard' Spartan procedure, in only a few hours.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 10:<strong>

**\*\* - Standard Procedure â€œ\*\***

**\*\*1300 Hours - April 25, 2552\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Spartan Barracks\*\***

"How long do we have?" Blaine asked as Samuel sat down on his bed.

He glanced at his watch. "Two hours," he said the words calmly, but, in truth, he'd never been so nervous in his life. He and his twenty-two remaining teammates were scheduled to undergo the "standard" Spartan genetic modifications very soon, and all he could think of were General Malone's words from their second "Informational Meeting," held on the 26th of May, seven years previous.

Even as Blaine spoke again, Samuel felt his memories take hold, and his mind drifted back to that day; the day the Spartans were told the horrors of genetic modification.

\* \* \*

><em>Samuel King waited anxiously for the last few days before the meeting to pass. He, along with Jason Zant, Ezekiel Veron, and Matt Sailors had to be taken to the Recovery Building after their first mock firefight.<em>

\_Samuel and Jason spent two days in Recovery for concussions caused by shots taken to the head, while Zeke and Matt had spent similar time inside for broken bones. Ezekiel's jump from his tower had resulted in a fractured leg (the "Death Dive," Marines called it), and he managed to break two of Matt's bones in his right arm, caused by his hard landing on the rocks after Zeke kicked him off the 'tower.'\_

\_After two more days' rest, the six days they'd spent waiting for their second meeting were up, and the intercom sent the Spartans down to the meeting room.\_

\_The General himself was speaking that day. "This program, as you all know, was started several years ago, in 2538." He said.\_

\_Samuel tuned in to every word, waiting on one that might reveal the details of their future-augmentations' effects on previous Spartans. He didn't have to wait long, however.\_

\_"As Ezekiel Veron mentioned, there were in fact 175 Spartan trainees to come before you. As he also mentioned, none of them are on the battlefield at this time, on account of failed augmentations and botched research plans."\_

\_The room went into turmoil. Samuel himself nearly lost it, thinking of the odds. Of 175 attempts, these augmentations had turned out zero successes. He wondered if even a single one of them would survive, as whispers and whimpers of fear echoed throughout the seated Spartans.\_

\_Finally, the Corporal's voice came from behind them, shouting "Enough!" For some reason, Corporal Charles behaved differently toward the Spartan trainees than the other Marines did. He seemed to actually care.\_

\_And, because of this care and respect, all of them were silent in an instant.\_

\_"That being said," the General continued, "not every Spartan was killed during the augmentation process. Some of them were moved to Intelligence-Branched of the military. Others were simply retired."\_

\_Samuel thought about this for a moment, but was interrupted as the General kept going.\_

\_"The truth is this: \_\_\*\*any\*\*\_\_ kind of augmentation is risky. There were several Spartan II's who didn't survive \_\_\*\*their\*\*\_\_ augmentation process. Even so-called 'standard' procedure is dangerous. Our additional augmentations simply offer a greater advantage against the Covenant." He paused before going on. "And this time, our scientists have had a full six years of research and testing to go on. We will not be rushed or ill-thought-out. Things \_\_\*\*will\*\*\_\_ go smoother this time."\_

\_As everyone worked to take in all the details, the General switched topics. Samuel's mind was a mess once again, trying to sort through the new information.\_

\_"And, as I promised, I'll now tell you what I know about the current state of the war. Honestly, I don't know much. I know that we're holding them, for now. I also know that the Spartan II's have been giving those damned aliens a reason to think twice before messing with humanity. They've fought them both in space \_\_\*\*and\*\*\_\_ on the ground, and through sheer will, have refused to let anyone down here at home."\_

\_At that point, Samuel looked up, meeting the General's glance as he moved from trainee to trainee.\_

\_"And, in a few years, you'll all do the same for usâ€|and for \_\_\*\*Earth\*\*\_\_"

\* \* \*

>Even seven years later, Samuel could remember feeling uneasy about the General's last few statements. Something hadn't added up then, and it didn't add up seven years down the line. The same question Samuel had wondered then echoed in his mind: "Why settle for twenty-five "Super-Spartans" when you could have two-<strong>hundred<strong> "Super-Soldiers?"

"\*\*Hey\*\*!" Blaine said, piercing his thoughts, "You in there?"

Samuel nodded as his mind came back to the present. Even so many years later, the thought that the General had been lying about something was pressing on him. If he wasn't telling the truth, what had he been falsifying?

Deep down, he could feel his worst fear crawling up to the surface. \_What if he lied about our odds? What if we're in just as much trouble as those who came before us? How many even \*\*survived\*\* the first augmentations and reached the second set?\_

At that moment, the intercoms came on throughout the Training Ground. "Attention! All Spartan trainees are to report to the Recovery Building for standard procedure augmentations."

Samuel shook his head, worried, and followed Blaine out.

\* \* \*

>Blaine separated from Samuel once they reached the Recovery Building's inner halls. A woman in a white coat read his name from a card, and pointed him into a room at the end of the hallway behind her. Slowly, nervously, he walked down to the end, and stepped inside the room. <p>It looked like the inside of a doctor's office. There was a big medical table in the middle for him to lie down on, and counters on the right-hand side with gloves, syringes, and various pieces of electrical equipment.<p>

"You can just lie down right there." A woman's voice came from behind him. He turned to see the same woman in white from before, pointing

the table.

In silence, Blaine did as he was told, and felt her jab a needle into his left arm, injecting him with a sedative.

"You'll be out in just a few minutes," she said, "and then we'll proceed."

\_Man, she's not lying,\_ Blaine thought wearily as he felt the sedative take effect. It took only a few moments, and he was unconscious.

\* \* \*

>As Corporal Charles patrolled the Recovery Building, checking up on each and every one of his sleeping Spartans, he couldn't help but wonder if things would really be different this time. Sure, they'd waited longer to do the augmentations, but was it <strong>enough</strong>? Any one of a **\*\*thousand\*\*** things could go wrong, and if they did, the boy or girl on the table was either useless in battle, or **\*\*dead\*\***.

\_\*\*Why?\*\*\_ He wondered to himself. \_Why the **\*\*Hell\*\***\_\_ did I do this again?\_

He reached Ezekiel Veron's room just as a nurse was administering muscle-enhancing injections and a thyroid implant used to boost the growth of both skeletal tissues and muscle tissues. The teen's unconscious body never moved, except for the rhythmic movement of the chest with the lungs.

\_Why did I take part in this?\_ He wondered again. \_What if I'm responsible for the-\_

His thoughts were distracted by a loud, annoying beeping coming from down the hall. Suddenly, the noises grew louder and closer together, and he heard a woman yelling. The Corporal left Zeke's room as fast as he could run, knocking down two frantic researchers in the hall as he ran to the source of the noise. He stepped inside a room at one end of the hall, and saw Jordan Hawks on a table, going into convulsions.

Two nurses pushed him aside and tried to strap the boy down. They injected him with a substance that Charles didn't recognize, but the boy didn't even slow down. His arms and legs started going into spasms, hitting the table so hard that the Corporal heard it crack in several places.

Without warning, he suddenly stopped convulsing, and the annoying beeping stopped as well. Charles looked up at the monitor and couldn't suppress a gasp. He suddenly wished with all he had that that infernal beeping would return, but it didn't. Every number on the screen vanished, until only a single red line remained.

The boy had flat-lined.

Just like that, **\*\*Spartan 024 â€" Jordan Hawks\*\***, was dead.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Note: I hope that was at least a little better than before (for those of you who missed before, consider yourselves lucky). I'll have the next chapter up as soon as I can get around to it. As always, reviews are VERY much appreciated. Thanks very much.<strong>

## 12. Chapter 11: Saying Goodbye

**\*\*Chapter 11:\*\***

**\*\* - Saying Goodbye - \*\***

**\*\*2100 Hours - April 25, 2552\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Spartan Cemetery\*\***

Samuel stood silently in his specially-tailored black suit, listening to the General as the wind picked up for the third time that day and sand seemed to attack his nose and mouth. It didn't even register, though. Samuel's mind was with the stainless steel caskets the bodies of his fellow Spartans were being kept in.

Only twice before had Zulu Company been called to don their dress clothes as opposed to training gear: those were after the deaths of two other trainees, both of them in the winter of 2548.

"These are our fallen brothers," the General said solemnly, "and they will be remembered and honored accordingly." He took a moment to look at the two caskets lying in the sand before finishing. "All Spartans are dismissed," he said. "You're all to be in the barracks and in bed in one hour."

As the General finished, Samuel still found himself standing there, glancing from side to side, silently mourning his team's losses. Two Spartans, Jordan Hawks and Steven Clarke, had both been lost to horrible seizures during the augmentations. The nurses had done all they couldâ€|but, as they'd been warned, losses were inevitable.

Another two Spartans had found themselves permanently impaired and useless on the battlefield after the augmentations. Lauren Vance and Stephen Trell found themselves confined to wheelchairs after the thyroid implants reared some of their worst side-effects.

\_But the rest of us survived,\_ Samuel thought. \_Thank you,\_ he prayed, bowing his head, \_for watching over us. I ask that you continue to do so, not just for Zulu Company, but for the rest of the world as well.\_

He finished his silent prayer as the General finally walked away from the two caskets. As the rest of the Spartans turned to leave, Samuel slowly stepped up to his fallen teammates.

"I'm sorry," he said, using the last seven years of training to hold back any emotion from his voice. "You were both family to me, and to everyone here." He paused, thinking of how to end his goodbye. Finally, the words came. "And rest in peace," he said, "because I promise you now: we will end this war for **\*\*good\*\***, no matter what it takes."

Having finished, he turned and walked silently to the Spartan barracks.

\* \* \*

>Ezekiel stalked slowly back to the barracks without a word to anyone, even a goodbye to the lost members of Zulu Company. True, it was a miserable thought that they had gone through seven years of training for nothing, and that Zulu Company was now down to nineteen Spartans, but it wasn't what was pressing on his mind. <p>What was really on his mind was his essentially 'new' body. After the augmentations, all Spartans had been ordered to do <strong>nothing</strong> but eat and rest for what was going on three weeks. With their enhanced strength, speed, and reaction time, their minds needed time to basically relearn how to control their bodies.

And Zeke, along with a few of the others, was growing tired of it. Seven years of training as a Spartan had done **\*\*wonders\*\*** for his almost-non-existent patience that he had as a teenager, but he was still Ezekiel Veron, and he was still **\*\*far\*\*** from patient, aside from when he was looking through an S2 Sniper Rifle scope.

For three weeks they'd done **\*\*no\*\*** sparring, **\*\*no\*\*** shootingâ€|not even studying within the bounds of their makeshift classrooms on Covenant weapons or historic battles. Every day, he noticed something different since the augmentations. His first day conscious, he watched a nurse trip and tip over a plate of syringesâ€|each of which seemed to fall to the ground at **\*\*half\*\*** the speed they should have.

At first, his newfound strength grew extremely annoying. Doors swung open three times harder than he wanted them to. He seemed to **\*\*slam\*\*** his feet into the ground with every step. The first few days, even lights and sounds caused him splitting headaches.

But, after a few weeks, the negative effects started to die down. Ezekiel could now control his movements and the force behind them with relative ease. His eyes and ears had adjusted to their new levels of intensity. He felt betterâ€|beyond better.

He felt like a Spartan.

\_Soon,\_ he thought, **\*\*soon\*\***.\_ Now that he had a decent amount of control over his body again, there was nothing in the world he wanted to do more than to take it for a test-drive of sorts. Sparring, shootingâ€|anything physical sounded perfect.

Eventually, he reached the barracks, walked inside, and took a seat on his bottom bunk. Glancing upward, he saw the dent on the bottom of Samuel's bunk, where he had slammed his head on their first day of training.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps echo from the hall outside the room. Even without his improved hearing, Zeke could feel how heavy the steps were, and immediately realized that no one except Samuel or Magnus could make that much noise.

"Samuel," Zeke said quietly to himself. The door opened slowly and,

sure-enough, twenty-three year old Samuel King stepped silently into the room.

"Hey Zeke," he said, walking passed the six sleeping Spartans in the room. No one had been moved since day one, and Zeke heard the metal above him rattle and creak as Samuel sat down on the top bunk.

"Hi Sam," he answered, "where you been?"

The older Spartan shook his head. "Just saying goodbye," he said.

Zeke scowled. "Goodbyes are pointless." He said cynically. "They're **\*\*dead\*\***, my friend. Their ears stopped working the same time their hearts did." Samuel sighed sadly, and, for the first time in his life, Ezekiel wondered if his words were too harsh. "I mean," he stuttered. He was uncomfortable, and wasn't used to looking for words that would be considered compassionate or consoling. "Maybe they-"

"I **\*\*know\*\***, Zeke." Samuel said shortly, cutting him off. Never, in the seven years that he'd known him, had Ezekiel ever heard Samuel interrupt someone with a tone filled with such contempt. "It's just that, I **\*\*need\*\*** to say goodbye. They were brothers to me," he paused as he jumped down from his bunk to look Ezekiel in the eyes, then added, "and to **\*\*you\*\*** as well."

Zeke sat silently, pondering the idea and wondering if he really was just being 'a soldier,' or if perhaps he was too cold for his own good. He wondered why it mattered so much to Samuel that personal goodbyes be said for those that couldn't even hear him.

"So, what's the difference?" Zeke finally asked, "Between you and me, I mean."

Samuel stared at him, and then started to speak. "Well-"

"Samuel **\*\*actually\*\*** gives a damn." Blaine's voice came from behind. Zeke turned to see him standing only three feet from him and Samuel. The guy's smirk reminded Zeke of himself for a moment.

"Who invited you into this?" Zeke asked jokingly, secretly glad for the change of subject.

"You did," he said, "when you went and asked one of the dumbest questions I've heard in all my life." He laughed. "And if you remember Stephanie when we first got here, there were a **\*\*lot\*\*** of stupid questions."

\* \* \*

><em>How can they <em>**\*\*joke\*\***\_\_ about this like it's a game?\_ Jason Zant wondered as he lay silently in his own bunk. He could hear Blaine and Ezekiel treating the deaths of their teammates "their **\*\*friends\*\***" "as if they were nothing. Zeke had no respect for the need for goodbyes, and Blaine just brushed the whole situation off.

"There's no respect in acting this way." He mumbled to himself. Jason, even in his childhood and adolescence, had never been serious



by nature, but respect was always at the top of his priorities. He could joke constantly, and take any situation in stride. But to him, there was a time for laughs, and a time for silence.

Samuel understood that. Jason could tell he did by the sorrowful look gripping his normally-optimistic features.

After seven years of training, all of Zulu Company were like family to one-another. Even so, the sync and near-**impossible** efficiency they showed working together as a team during a shootout or sparring only extended so far. Jason knew better than to confront either Ezekiel or Blaine with their attitudes; it was best simply to block them out and not allow them to influence his own behavior.

With the threat of the Covenant finding Earth looming closer with every passing day, not one of the Spartans could afford a serious problem with the others. For nearly a decade, it had been drilled into their heads that teamwork was their only chance of bringing down the most dangerous of the Covenant ranks. Without teamwork, the Spartans would be torn apart.

And without the Spartans, **Earth** would soon follow suit.

Painfully, against his urge to speak, Jason pushed Zeke and Blaine far from his mind, choosing to focus instead on what he could remember of his childhood. The first thing he could remember was the day he was chosen to be a Spartan.

First, he remembered driving with his father to a local park, to run. Slowly, his past began to return to him. He liked to run. What was it he did in school? Track? Yes, he ran track. He remembered parking his car, and his father getting out after seeing a young girl he knew, in her twenties. Jason remembered that, as his father flirted with the woman, he got out of the car to check something.

He remembered thinking about his father as he opened hood. His father **hated** him. He hated his father. The man was good for **nothing** but chasing women and yelling at Jason's mother. His mind had left his father as he looked at something that was wrong with the car.

**What** was it? He thought, trying hard to remember. It was something under the hood. Spark plugs? No. Radiator? No. Oil.

**Oil**; he was checking the oil.

And then his life changed.

As he stood there, hunched over, someone came from behind him and hit him hard in the back. He remembered flailing around, trying to yell, but they covered his mouth. Something sharp was pressed into his arm, and he felt the sedative take effect as his will and energy left him.

The last thing he remembered was passing out and waking up in the back of a large van.

My last day as a child, he thought, and my **first** day as a

Spartan.\_ Suddenly, his mind wandered to his family. \_I wonder, did my father even \_\_\*\*notice\*\*\_\_? Did he even care? What about my mom? What did he \_\_\*\*do\*\*\_\_ while I wasn't \*\*there\*\*?\_ He felt himself grow angry as the questions presented themselves.

The loudspeakers in the corners of the bunk-room crackled with static before coming on completely. "Attention! Tomorrow, all original training exercises will be started again. All Spartans are to be up and battle-ready at 0600. That is all."

"Well," Jason said sadly as he lost his thoughts inside his mind, "the past is the past." It was then that he made up his mind to do something he'd wanted to do since the day he arrived at the Zulu Training Ground.

Finally, he decided to leave it behind. His past was no longer his concern. "Goodbye," he whispered, immediately feeling calmer, relaxed. Slowly, effortlessly, he drifted into sleep. Training was to begin tomorrow, and he would need the rest.

\* \* \*

><p><p>

**\*\*Author's Note:** I know there wasn't much action this chapter, but it'll pick back up soon. I wanted to get in some character development, and I think I got enough in for just this one. You're gonna see exactly how much difference these augmentations made in the Cage next time around, and I hope to post that one a little faster than I did this one. As always, reviews are great, and I'd love to have more. To all those who've reviewed (and those who've read, for that matter), thanks very much and have a nice day.\*\*

**\*\*Also:** From now on, all reviews that I choose to reply to (these include questions, in-depth reviews, or catching my major screw-ups) will be answered on even-numbered chapters. So, next chapter (12), I'll answer any from last chapter, or this one. Thanks all.\*\*

### 13. Chapter 12: Reborn

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Hey, sorry for the delay on this one. My college class has started up, and, to be honest, between Calculus and college applications, I lack a lot of free time. Anyway, I've got answers to a few reviews below, and then I'll go right to the chapter. For those of you who've forgotten, it's the day after the Spartan "funeral" service, and sparring is about to begin once again. Now, reviews:\*\*

**\*\*Frostbyte06:** I appreciate the compliment, and I know what you mean with the character issues. Like I said, it'll get easier (has it gotten any easier in the last few chapters? I've tried to focus a bit more...).\*\*

**\*\*vern:** I appreciate your input as well, and I'm glad the cliffhangers didn't deter anyone from reading. I honestly didn't mean to do it, but...it happens. Thank you for sticking with me.\*\*

**\*\*numaman:** Hmm...I know you, lol. Thanks for the compliments Luke,

and in response to your questions: I will be removing several Spartans to make the story fit a bit better...if you really wanna know, you can ask me, and I'll tell you in person, but I'd rather not spoil it for everyone on here. And, regarding Zeke...yeah, he's kind of my main character. Didn't really mean it that way, but it just happened. Oh, and a final note: I can't wait to get to Plasma Grenades either...\*\*

\*\*GuardianXAngel: Thank you very much for your positive input. I'm glad the story's a hit to at least a few of you out there.\*\*

\*\*Trueshot159: Wow...your review flatters me. I think the story's OK...but I'm not sure I'd go that far. Thank you very much though, the review made my day. I hope you continue to like it as I get farther along.\*\*

\*\*AND FINALLY:\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: Thanks for the comment, and I'll tell you this: this chapter you're about to read is Chapter 12: Reborn, and I'm looking at getting them their first taste of the Covenant by Chapter 18, at the VERY latest. It will likely be in 4 or 5 more chapters, but no guarantees. I will tell you that, after only one or two more chapters, I'm hitting October 20th (for those of you who know Halo, you know that that's the day the Covenant first landed on Earth), 2552. And, in regards to your question on the Master Chief: he's about the best character in the world, but I won't be incorporating him too much into my story because, really, his personality is very difficult to judge. It's much easier and less risky when working with my characters, because I know how they'd react in a scenario. The Master Chief...I risk misjudging his reaction to something and offending my readers. I'm sure you understand. He will make an appearance or two, however.\*\*

\*\*NOW, to the chapter!\*\*

\*\*

\* \* \*

><strong>

\*\*Chapter 12:\*\*

\*\* - Reborn - \*\*

\*\*0800 Hours - April 26, 2552\*\*

\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Sparring Cage\*\*

Christopher could feel his palms sweating as Stephanie stared him down from the far side of the cage. They'd been selected to fight first, and in truth, Chris couldn't wait. After three weeks of doing nothing, it almost \*\*hurt\*\* to wait for the Marine outside to yell "Go!"

Suddenly, the Marine's mouth began to move and he felt his entire body tense. Before the word could even leave the man's mouth, Chris darted in Stephanie's direction, instantly hitting 30 km/h. By the

time he was half-way to her, he was topping 45 km/h.

Seconds later, he was lunging at her with a series of fast, crisp kicks and strikes. Each time he reached out, he felt her arms and legs block his strikes, and she sent more than a few at him as well. Nothing felt any different, but Chris knew the truth: the two of them were actually fighting at speeds a normal human would have trouble keeping up with, with their reaction times being over three times that of a non-augmented, normal soldier.

\_Not too bad,\_ he thought, completely impressed by how much Stephanie had improved. No longer was she a whiny teenage girl; she was full grown super-human "a Spartan" and it was impossible to deny her newfound power and agility.

CRACK!

Christopher felt her left foot connect with his shoulder, sending him spiraling several meters away from her, only stopping when he hit a bar on the side of the cage. He rubbed his shoulder for a moment, checking for broken bones, and realized that there weren't any. As the pain subsided, he recalled the details of one of their augmentations:

"The carbide ceramic ossification is a complex procedure that will, in essence, graft solid material onto your bones, making them virtually indestructible." The Corporal had explained the process to them, careful to leave out any of the possible side-effects.

\_\*\*Damn\*\*\_ right,\_ he thought as he stood back up, completely unharmed by a blow that would've crippled or \*\*killed\*\* a normal soldier.

"Break anything?" Stephanie mocked, stepping slowly closer.

"No," Chris answered smugly, "but I'll be sure to ask you in just a second!"

He charged her again and watched closely for her reaction. Both her arms rose to protect her chest and face, and her right leg took a step back, allowing her to block with the left.

\_Too easy,\_ he thought.

When he was only a meter from her, he yelled "incoming!" and made a mock-strike at her right side. As expected, she pulled her left knee over to block it. The second the movement started, however, Chris actually grabbed her kneecap and spun his right leg into her defenseless ribcage. She made an almost-inaudible noise as the force of the strike knocked her into the cage bars.

"Not|not bad," she said as she pulled herself up, seeming unharmed. "But what're you gonna do now that I know to watch that side?"

Chris frowned. \_Good question,\_ he thought.

\* \* \*

><em>Come <em>\_\*\*on,\*\*\_ Ezekiel thought impatiently, \_hurry up and

finish so someone \_\_\*\*else\*\*\_\_ can get a workoutâ€|namely \_\_\*\*me.\*\*\_\_  
For three weeks he'd been waiting for this, and now it seemed like he'd never get his shot.

Zeke watched calmly as the two Spartans inside the cage continued to go at it like super-human ninjas from an old movie. One would punch, the other block. One would kick, the other would dodge. While over a dozen Marines who had gathered to watch had to work just to catch glimpses of their fight, Zeke, with his augmented sight and hearing, actually found it to be very boring.

He looked over at the other Spartans. Blaine was watching intently, and so was Samuel. Magnus' thoughts were clearly elsewhere, as he was looking at the cage, but his eyes never moved. Victoria had a look on her face Zeke recognized from a mirror: she too wanted to fight. Jason and Landon were watching the fight, but were also humming an annoying tune Ezekiel didn't recognize in the slightest.

Finally, Zeke glanced back at the cage, just in time to watch Stephanie make her first â€" and \*\*last\*\* â€" mistake.

She threw a punch at her Spartan opponent's chest, but he dodged at the last possible second, and she was left with her hand hanging in the air. She let it hang half a second too long, and Christopher grabbed her forearm and twisted it behind her back.

To the Marine's watching, it would've looked more like flashes or photos than an actual fight. One second, one glance, she's punching and kicking. The next, she's pinned to the ground with her hand twisted up by her neck.

"Alright, that's enough!" The Marine yelled from outside, throwing open the door of the cage. "Next two are Magnus and Blaine."

"Damn it," Ezekiel cursed under his breath. He wanted \*\*his\*\* name called.

He watched angrily as Chris helped Stephanie to her feet, and they walked silently out of the cage. Seconds later, Magnus led Blaine inside, and they were staring one-another down, just as the two before them had done.

"Come \*\*on\*\*," Zeke said, tapping his foot subconsciously, "hurry up."

\* \* \*

>The Marine yelled "Go!" and Blaine watched as Magnus cracked his knuckles loudly. <p>"<strong>Damn</strong>, he's big." He mumbled to himself as the other Spartan started to walk toward him. Even \*\*after\*\* augmentation, the only Spartan to rival Magnus in size was Samuel, and he too was slightly smaller.

As the older Spartan got closer, Blaine tried hard to control himself. Still, after seven years of training and work, his temper was still there. It was contained, "caged," but not destroyed. He'd just grown better at controlling himself.

"Alright Blaine," Magnus said loudly, stopping just outside of arms-reach. "I hope you're actually going to \*\*fight\*\* this time,

none of this 'control your temper' **\*\*crap\*\***."

Blaine felt his heart quicken. Magnus wanted a **\*\*real\*\*** fight. He **\*\*wanted\*\*** to see Blaine's temper in action. \_I've never really tried,\_ he thought, remembering that the last time he let his temper show, he nearly killed Jordan Hawks.

As a Spartan, he'd been taught how to deal with daily scenarios. Enemies were to be neutralized without mercy. Teammates and fellow soldiers were to be respected and valued as allies. Superior officers were to be obeyed, almost completely regardless to the situation.

And, normally, Magnus was a teammate. He was an ally. But now, in the cage, what was he? Was he to be neutralized like any other enemy?

The older Spartan must have somehow sensed Blaine's internal struggle, because he suddenly cocked his head and laughed. "This time," he said, "within the bounds of the cage, we're enemies." He looked Blaine dead in the eye. **\*\*Treat\*\*** me like one."

That was what he needed to hear. **\*\*Enemy,\*\***\_ he thought. Blaine glanced outside the cage, to the Marine supervising. The man nodded calmly.

Blaine nodded as well, but as he started to turn his head back toward Magnus, he felt his opponent's right fist crash into his cheek, sending him skidding across the floor.

Before he could move, Magnus was on him, picking him up by the collar of his shirt and throwing him into the cage wall. A second later, Blaine felt himself being lifted by the arm, and then was weightless for a time as he was flung into the opposite wall of the cage.

He hit, and felt the bars bend before falling to the ground.

\* \* \*

>Magnus dashed again, this time grabbing Blaine by the hair and starting to spin, preparing the longest toss he could manage. Deep inside, he wondered <strong>why</strong> he was so cruel, so efficient, even against his fellow Spartans inside the bounds of the cage. Instantly, he pushed the thought out. It didn't matter. All that mattered was getting a job done.

And right now, his job was to beat Blaine.

Finally, he let go of his fellow soldier mid-spin, and was shocked to realize that two hands were gripping his forearms with a death-grip. Blaine pulled himself in, closer to Magnus, raising his leg up and effectively smashing his foot into the older Spartan's stomach as he did so.

Magnus felt his legs nearly buckle as he doubled over. His training kicked in almost immediately, however, and he blocked out the pain entirely after only a few seconds.

Unfortunately, those few seconds were all Blaine needed to slam his fist into Magnus' shoulder before he could stand back up. Already

off-balance, he fell to the floor, rolling several feet in an effort to put as much distance between himself and his opponent as possible. Finally, he pulled himself up, almost completely unharmed, and turned to face Blaine, staring him down once more.

"You're **\*\*losing\*\***." Blaine's voice cut through the air without a hint of emotion, except perhaps for the tinge of arrogance hidden in the word "losing." Magnus frowned. Blaine had been hanging around Ezekiel for too long.

\* \* \*

>Corporal Charles pulled his whistle up to his lips. He'd been watching the fight thus far, but it had gone on long enough. Both Spartans were in fine, physically, but they were breathing hard. Neither one was used to his augmented body yet; and there wasn't any reason to be testing their limits after only a few weeks of nothing but bed-rest. <p>Simply put, he couldn't risk, after all they'd been through, the possibility of one of them being seriously injured in a mock fight. He made up his mind, and blew the whistle loudly.<p>

Immediately, all nineteen Spartans turned and saluted, stopping whatever they were doing without a second thought. They all stood at attention, waiting for him.

"At ease," he said. Then he turned to the two in the cage. "Magnus," he yelled, "Blaine, that's enough for today. You guys get out here and get yourselves a drink. With the augmentations only a few weeks ago, your risk for dehydration and health complications is still high."

Both Spartans nodded and, without a word, left the cage at a slow pace. Charles couldn't believe how fluid â€" how **\*\*natural\*\*** â€" their actions were, so soon after going all-out in a sparring match.

During the fight, he'd scarcely been able to **\*\*register\*\*** their movements, much less actually **\*\*see\*\*** them. They attacked and dodged with such speed and efficiency, it was impossible to imagine a normal human being in combat with them. A Marine, no matter how well trained, wouldn't even see the shots coming; only feel the bones as they broke one after another.

It was then that he realized the truth: the augmentations had truly worked. And they were worth every second of torment, every scream of pain. The trainees â€" the **\*\*Spartans\*\*** â€" were something new now. They weren't seven-year Marines. Hell, they were **\*\*barely\*\*** human anymore. They were another breed, evolved and engineered **\*\*specifically\*\*** to end the war with the Covenant. They were **\*\*bred\*\*** to finish the fight.

\_Spartans,\_ he thought, watching them, **\*\*incredible.\*\***\_

#### 14. Chapter 13: Cage Match

**\*\*Author's Notes:** After the five reviews I received on the last chapter, I guess I'm just going to start answering all questions chapter-by-chapter. Please note, in the following chapter, there is

about a 4-month time-jump from the first augmentations. No major "changes" have occurred, except that the Spartans, by this point, are well aware of and capable of controlling their bodies' new abilities and limits.\*\*

**\*\*REVIEWS:\*\***

**\*\*numaman:** Yes, my friend, the last one was just a little shorter than the one before it...but I think you'll find this one much more to your liking if you enjoy longer chapters.\*\*

**\*\*Lord of the Trees:** Yes, I apologize. The Master Chief will be mentioned several times, and if you played Halo 3, what he does in it will be going on behind-the-scenes in a lot of cases. Not all, but many.\*\*

**\*\*1 way ticket:** Hey, I said I was sorry! lol. Here's your fight, and I put both your favorites in there...forgive me now? Pretty please?\*\*

**\*\*Trueshot159:** Well, regardless, I appreciate your reviews and your continued reading, and I hope you'll continue to do both. I enjoy the reviews very much.\*\*

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian:** Thanks very much for your review. I appreciate the compliments, and I hope you find the next chapters to be equally enjoyable.\*\*

**\*\*Now, in regards to the chapter:** I know it's very long compared to my normal. Also, it switches viewpoints a LOT, but you should know, it never leaves the Cage. For reference, it'll switch between five Spartans only: Ezekiel, Victoria, Magnus, Blaine, and Jason. I hope this helps. \*\*

**\*\*...Enjoy!\*\***

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 13:<strong>

â€" **\*\*Cage-Match** â€" \*\*

**\*\*1800 Hours - August 14, 2552\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Sparring Cage\*\***

Victoria looked over to the two Spartans on her right. Ezekiel's glare was rock solid and cold as ice, as always. Jason was calm, simply waiting for the announcement before the battle would begin.

She glanced to the far end of the cage.

Magnus was there, giving Ezekiel the same death-glare he always gave him when they fought. Christopher, like normal, was standing on edge, his breath coming quickly until he forced it to slow. Blaine's fists were clenched at his sides, and his eyes glanced from Victoria, to Ezekiel, to Jason, and then right back to her.

Victoria took a deep breath, forcing herself to remain completely



focused. Three-on-three fights were nothing new. They'd been doing them for months. There was nothing about this fight that was any different.

\_Except \_\_\*\*him,\*\*\_ she thought, glancing toward Ezekiel once more. She'd been placed on his team only a few dozen times in all the years spent at the Zulu Training Ground. And never, not **\*\*once\*\***, had she been on his team, against Magnus.

She didn't dislike Ezekiel, by any means. Each one of the Spartans was family to the rest, and each of them got along well enough with the others. But the fact was that she would never pick Zeke as her first choice as a partner in battle.

He was arrogant.

He was proud.

Simply put, he was too much like her. She was smart enough to know that their fighting styles and personalities would clash in battle. She was good, and she **\*\*knew\*\*** it.

And he was good. Even among the most elite soldiers in history, there were tiers that developed. Ezekiel, Magnus, Victoria, and Blaine were top-tier fist-fighters. Samuel, Jason and Christopher were at the tip-top of armed combat with anything but a long-range rifle. That was one record Ezekiel still held.

"Alright," the Marine outside the cage said finally, snapping her out of her thoughts, "begin!"

Without a second's warning, Zeke took off at full speed, topping better than 50 km/h as he ran for the other end of the cage. Jason was still for a moment, stunned, and then took off as well, moving only slightly slower.

Victoria risked a glance at her opponents at the far end before running behind her teammates. They were unsure. Blaine had braced himself for whatever Jason could throw, and neither Chris nor Magnus knew which one of them Zeke would actually target, since he ran in a line directly toward the space between them.

But she knew the ending. Zeke wouldn't target Chris while Magnus was standing perfectly in his way. No, he'd fight that **\*\*monster\*\*** of a Spartan just for the challenge.

Victoria looked Magnus straight in the eye and darted for him, beating Zeke's speed by a few kilometers per hour in less than two seconds. When it came to speed, she was tops, plain and simple.

\* \* \*

>Magnus watched the two smaller Spartans coming toward him and Chris, each one standing several inches shorter than he was and weighing more than fifty pounds less. Victoria was looking right at him, and Zeke seemed to glance at Chris, even though he wouldn't make any real commitment to his run. <p><em>I hope she doesn't think I'll take it easy on her,<em> he thought, focusing entirely on the female Spartan closing in on him with incredible speed. He turned as Ezekiel turned his body slightly to face Christopher, now only a meter away.

Chris braced himself for the strike, but Magnus turned away to focus on his own opponent.

And he paid dearly for it.

He felt a sharp pain run down his back as Ezekiel's foot connected with the top of his spinal cord. He was flung forward, but before he could hit the ground, the younger Spartan was there, sending a piercing uppercut to his stomach before kicking him hard into the side of the cage.

\* \* \*

>Ezekiel was very pleased with himself. Their plan had worked perfectly. Magnus had instantly suspected that Victoria would make him her target, and he let down his guard long enough for Zeke to plant him right in the bars of the cage, where he belonged. He could only watch as the behemoth slowly stood up, the bars behind him bent at strange angles and a few of them even snapped at the bottom.  
<p>"Magnus," Zeke taunted, "I'm disappointed. I thought you'd actually be a challenge, you know, being '<strong>the best<strong>' and all."

The older soldier shot him a glare that was the coldest he'd ever seen. A second later, he was on his feet, and he ripped one of the steel bars from the side of the cage and began twirling the six-foot strip of metal like a baton.

"Oh, **\*\*Hell\*\***," Zeke moaned as Magnus closed the gap between them, still spinning the steel rod at untold speeds.

Just as he came within arms-reach, Magnus put both hands above his head and began spinning the bar horizontally. A split-second later, he brought it straight down like a club, aiming right for Ezekiel's head.

In that split-second, Ezekiel managed only barely to shift his weight to his right foot and move out from underneath the strike. Before Magnus could pull the bar up off the floor, Ezekiel stepped lightly on it with his right foot and spun a complete 360, the heel of his left foot catching Magnus in the cheek and sending him into yet another piece of the wall.

Zeke picked the bar up off the ground and began twirling it slowly. "Now-now, Magnus," he said, holding the rod up for him to see, "I could've been **\*\*killed\*\***!"

Magnus' glare grew even darker. **\*\*\*Enough\*\***." He said.

"Okay," Zeke taunted, "maybe not '**\*\*killed\*\***,' but that could've at **\*\*least\*\*** left a bruise." His ever-present smirk appeared as Magnus picked himself up angrily.

"One day Zeke," he snapped, "you're gonna get yours."

"Yeah," he admitted. His face was solemn for a moment before his arrogant smirk returned, "But **\*\*not\*\*** **\*\*today\*\***."

\* \* \*

><em>How the <em>\_\*\*Hell\*\*\_ did I end up the guy fighting  
\_\*\*Blaine?\*\*\_ Jason thought as he exchanged blows with the other  
Spartan. He glanced to his left to see Victoria fighting with  
Christopher.

SMACK!

Blaine's boot connected with his right thigh, and his hands came down  
instinctively. In that moment, both of Blaine's fists shot forward  
and hit him in the abdomen, knocking him flat on the floor.

Before he could stand back up, Blaine was already charging him.

\_Oh, \_\*\*damn,\*\*\_ he thought. Blaine kicked him hard in the ribs,  
causing him to gain airtime before hitting the bars making up the  
wall of the cage and falling to the floor.

As Blaine charged again, Jason watched Victoria turn away from  
Christopher and sprint toward the gap between Blaine and himself. She  
was a lot faster than he was, and met him halfwayâ€|five feet in the  
air and with her leg outstretched.

Blaine went rolling on the floor and Victoria returned to her fight  
with Chris, giving Jason enough time to regain his bearings. He  
looked at Blaine.

\_My turn,\_ he thought, stepping closer, \_let's see where your temper  
gets you \_\*\*this \*\*time.\_

\* \* \*

>Zeke ducked low as Magnus' fist shot through the air where his head  
had just been. His first few strikes against the behemoth of a  
Spartan had been enough to fatigue Magnus, and now the tired  
super-soldier could barely touch him. Ezekiel threw a hard  
right-handed punch and felt it connect with Magnus' gut, causing him  
to double-over. <p>"Come <strong>on<strong> Magnus," he said. "I'm  
\*\*bored\*\*!"

As if he'd hit a switch, Magnus sprung up and thrust his right foot  
at Ezekiel's stomach. The younger Spartan simply gripped his  
opponent's ankle, jumped, and spun off Magnus' leg, kicking him in  
the kidney in the process.

\_This is just too easy.\_ Zeke thought, smirking as he watched Magnus  
bend down and clutch his side. \_Wow,\_ he thought, \_he must be  
slacking. I didn't kick him \_\*\*that\*\*\_ hard.\_

As Magnus stood there, rubbing his side, Zeke ran forward, swinging  
his right foot out wide in an attempt to catch the other kidney. His  
leg swung through the air at lightning-speed, covering the distance  
in less than a second.

And, at that moment, Magnus stood straight up and caught Zeke by his  
outstretched ankle, the force of the kick not even fazing him.

\_Oh damn, \_Zeke thought, \_too cocky. I got too comfortable.\_

A half-second later, Magnus spun around threw him by his ankle hard

into the side of the cage. Ezekiel felt a sense of irony as four steel bars bent to the shape of his back when he smashed into them. A voice in his head kept saying, "That's what you **\*\*get\*\*** for being overconfident."

As he stood up, Zeke decided to take a trick from Magnus' book. He grabbed two of the bent steel bars and ripped them from the rest of the cage, spinning them both in his hands. "You remember this trick, don't you Magnus?" He asked with a smirk, masking the already-fleeting pain in his back.

To his surprise, Magnus only smiled in response.

\_Alright, \_he thought, \_time to see how this really works.\_ He took off toward Magnus and swung the bar in his right hand hard into his opponent's arm.

And he took it without flinching.

"What the--"

Before he could finish, Magnus had gripped him by both forearms and thrown him again into another group of cage bars. \_Oh,\_ he thought, \_I **\*\*forgot\*\***\_, he's freakin' **\*\*Goliath!\*\***\_ He felt six more bars bend painfully as his back seemed to bend right along with them. It took all he had to ignore the pain that was now creeping from his back down into his legs.

"You know, you're **\*\*almost\*\*** an effective fighter when you're focused." Zeke mocked, his smirk overshadowing any expression of pain he should've worn. "I just hope that's not all you've got."

Magnus grinned coldly, clearly enjoying himself. Zeke wondered if he knew just how much pain he was in.

"You're all talk." The older Spartan said.

Zeke was about to respond when he heard and **\*\*felt\*\*** a terrible impact against the cage ten feet to his left. He could hear loud moaning as Jason stood up shakily.

**\*\*'Bout time\*\*** you got here." Zeke joked. "Care to give me a hand?" He motioned toward Magnus.

"Yeah, sure," he said, "If you'll get 'monster-man' over there off my back." Jason pointed directly at Blaine, who was standing twelve feet away, wearing a smirk similar to Zeke's.

\* \* \*

><em>Men,<em> Victoria thought coldly as she saw her two partners working to stand up after being smashed into the cage bars. She herself was doing fine, with Christopher working just to keep up.

"You're not bad Chris," she said in a falsely comforting tone, "but you're too slow."

Chris grinned as he crouched into a karate-style fighting stance. "But when I **\*\*do\*\*** catch you, you're **\*\*done\*\***." He said calmly.

Victoria couldn't help but grin.

"You mean '\*\*if\*\*' you catch me."

Chris stopped smiling and charged her, swinging his arms at speeds the Marines outside the cage wouldn't be able to follow in their \*\*dreams\*\*. But to Victoria, it was a joke. For reasons the scientists hadn't been able to deduce yet, her body had responded exceptionally well to the neurological augmentations, and for it, her reaction time was one that left even the other Spartans in the dust. Zeke was next in line, but he too had to go all-out to land a punch.

She laughed aloud, dodging punches and kicks like they were coming in slow motion. This made Chris angrier, and he lunged with more effort, coming closer every time to hitting her, but still missing his mark.

Suddenly, she heard Magnus yell from behind her, and couldn't stop herself from turning to look. She saw him fall to the ground as a spinning Ezekiel Veron pulled in his outstretched leg and dropped several feet to the ground as well. Somehow, the smaller Spartan had landed another kick, this time on Magnus' head.

Unfortunately, her glance cost her, as Chris took the opportunity to land a punch of his own, hitting her in the jaw and sending her skidding across the floor.

She sat up, tasting the blood from her lip.

\_He actually \_\_\*\*hit\*\*\_\_ me,\_ she thought, \_he \_\_\*\*actually\*\*\_\_ caught me.\_ Instantly, she was furious not only with him, but with herself. \_That \_\_\*\*stupid\*\*\_\_ Magnus,\_ she thought, angry that she, for some reason, had turned around.

When Chris went to kick her as she got up, she quickly balanced on her right hand, effectively cart-wheeling out of his reach. He turned, thrusting his right hand for her jaw once more.

This time, however, she was focused. More so, she was angry. She pulled her head back, out of reach, and used her own right hand to slap his out to the side, leaving him off-balance. As she did it, she spun a half-circle and brought her left foot up, hard, catching him under his chin and leaving him looking at the sky. Before he could even breathe, she jumped and spun a 360, kicking him in the face with her right foot and landing on her feet with her back to him.

She heard a thud and the sound of flesh against concrete behind her. Then she heard a second thud as Chris slammed into the steel cage bars.

And then nothing.

"One down," she said.

\* \* \*

>"Maybe next time," Zeke said as Magnus fell to the ground, finally unconscious. He was worn out, and his whole body ached. <p>"Hey, you wanna give me a hand <strong>now<strong>?" Jason's voice echoed as he

fought with Blaine, exchanging punches and blocks. Honestly, Zeke was amused. The two of them were evenly matched.

"No," he said flatly. "When we're fighting Covenant, I'll help you out whenever possible, but this is just sparring. If you can't stand on your **\*\*own\*\*** two feet, you don't deserve to stand at **\*\*all\*\***."

"Thanks," Jason said sarcastically without even turning to look at him.

"Anytime," Zeke said.

He froze when he heard footsteps behind them, and then relaxed when he recognized their rhythm.

"Well Victoria, I take it you beat Chris?" He said without turning around.

"Well, **\*\*yeah\*\***." She said coldly, her voice making a point to show how stupid a question it was for him to ask.

"Just asking," Zeke answered, still watching Jason's fight.

Then, she surprised him.

"How about you and I spar while we wait for the **\*\*kids\*\*** to finish?" She joked.

Zeke thought about it, then shook his head. In theory, they **\*\*could\*\***, since the Spartans weren't really supervised in the Cage anymore, but he really didn't feel up to it. "Sorry," he said, "I just fought your boyfriend, and I'm a little tired."

He heard her scoff behind him, making him smirk. "Spartans don't have relationships." She said.

"Of **\*\*course\*\*** not," he said mockingly, still not turning.

Suddenly, pain shot up and down his back as her foot smashed into him, and he was sent face-first onto the concrete. He turned to her, furious.

"You're going to regret that." He growled. She smiled, irritating him further.

She shrugged, "nah."

\* \* \*

>Blaine felt like the veins in his arms were going to explode as he forced himself to push harder. His hands were locked with Jason's, and they were both pushing forward for all they were worth, their feet actually <strong>denting</strong> the concrete beneath them. He was shorter than Jason was, but equally strong. Neither of them could gain even an inch of ground.

"Hope-you-can-doâ€|better!" he groaned, trying to move Jason even slightly. The other Spartan refused to budge.

"I...I can!" Jason growled back, and Blaine felt his footing begin to slip. He forced his feet another centimeter deeper into the solid concrete.

Finally, Jason did something he hadn't expected. Blaine felt himself almost **\*\*fall\*\*** forward as Jason stopped pushing and fell backwards, thrusting his foot up into the air, sending it crashing into Blaine's stomach and then flipping him clean over his head. Blaine landed several feet away and slid across the floor of the cage.

"Well," he said, brushing the sand off his clothes as he stood up, "you finally hit me."

Jason laughed as he stood up. "There's more where that came from." He said.

\* \* \*

>Victoria couldn't help but smile as Zeke threw punch after punch without laying a single finger on her. Either he wasn't lying, and he really **<strong>was</strong>** tired, or he was just as slow as the rest of her teammates.

She dodged a punch to the face and kicked him in the stomach, causing him to stumble backwards.

"Little **\*\*witch\*\***," he snapped, throwing a kick up to her chest. She put her arms behind her and literally fell onto her palms, sending her legs up and kicking him in the stomach with both of them. The shot was enough to send him several feet into the air before falling to the floor.

"Aw," she said with a false pouting look on her face, "did I step on your **\*\*poor little ego\*\***?"

She swore she heard Zeke **\*\*literally\*\*** growl as he stood up, shaking either with rage or pain, she wasn't sure. Suddenly, a shocked look overtook his face. "No **\*\*way\*\***," he said, looking passed her, "I knocked him out!"

Victoria immediately thought of Magnus and turned behind her. That instant, she **\*\*knew\*\*** she'd made a mistake. He was still lying on the ground, as unconscious as ever.

A split-second later, she felt a knee pressed into her back and Zeke's arms come up under her own, bending at the elbow to put her into a lock. She felt a searing pain as he fell forward, pushing her forward as well and pressing his knee harder into her back as he did so. The pain hit a new level when she finally hit the ground, and it felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to her spine.

She felt him stand up and couldn't move in time to stop him from pinning her to the ground by the back of her neck. She struggled to get free, but stopped when the increasing pressure of his boot on the top of her spine became simply unbearable.

"I win." He said cruelly.

**\_\*\*Barely,\*\*\_** she thought with more than just a little bit of pride. She knew that, even though she lost, she'd done plenty of damage to

his ego in those few minutes. What's more, Ezekiel had had to trick her to beat her. That alone made it all worth it.

\* \* \*

>"Come on, Blaine, stand up you big girl!" Jason mocked as Blaine coughed painfully, spitting blood out onto the concrete. The battle had turned quickly after Jason landed a few shots in a row, but went from bad to worse when he started purposely mocking Blaine and his family. The problem was, Blaine knew <strong>exactly</strong> why he was doing it. Jason didn't truly **mean** any of it; he just wanted Blaine angry so that he couldn't focus.

And so far, it had worked.

"Enough!" Blaine growled as he stood up, spitting again.

"Aw, what's wrong?" Jason asked, his tone resembling one used when talking to a toddler. Blaine worked to control his temper.

\_Come on you **idiot**, **he** thought to himself, **you're** a damn **Spartan**\_. You're in control. He's just trying to get a rise out of you.\_ He felt his temper waiver slightly.

"So, you're not gonna fight, are you?" Jason asked. Blaine looked at him curiously. "Well, I'm sure your mom would be proud, but your dad might think you a bit of a wuss."

Blaine felt his control slipping. **Enough**, **he** thought, **stop** letting him get to you.\_ He was both proud of and furious with himself. Seven years previous, that single comment would've gotten Jason's head ripped clean off his shoulders. That, in addition to what he'd already said, would've no doubt been cause for his immediate pummeling. Now, after his training, he still wasn't the cold, emotionless warrior a few Spartans had become, but he was at least maintaining control.

"Oh come **on**!" Jason jeered, obviously frustrated that his tactics weren't working quite as well as he'd expected. Blaine smiled, feeling his rage rising to the top.

"No," he said, "if you want to fight, do it with your fists, and stop using your mouth."

Jason laughed. "Aw, **there's** mama's boy!" He said. "Bet your parents are just **so** proud!" His voice littered with sarcasm.

Finally, Blaine had had all he could stand. All the control in the world wasn't going to shut Jason up, and he was hurting too badly to go over and pummel the other Spartan.

"I concede the match." Blaine said, shocking even himself. Jason nearly fell over.

**What**?" He asked, truly puzzled and no doubt wondering if it was some kind of trick.

"I'm not going to fight anymore. I concede the match." Blaine was very pleased with the control he was exercising, even if it was



**\*\*killing\*\*** him to do it. He knew that, if he fought, he risked **\*\*actually\*\*** killing his fellow Spartan in a fit of rage. "Our fight is over."

\* \* \*

>Zeke couldn't believe what he was hearing. Blaine no doubt was **<strong>inches</strong>** from having steam shooting from his ears, and instead of killing Jason, was conceding the match entirely. Truthfully, it was an honorable gesture, but Ezekiel knew that they couldn't allow it.

"Perhaps you've forgotten, my friend," he said coldly, causing Blaine to turn toward him. The other Spartan's face went cold when he saw Victoria still pinned painfully under Zeke's boot.

"Forgotten **\*\*what\*\***?"

"Surrender is not a luxury we as Spartans can afford."

Blaine scoffed. "This is **\*\*not\*\*** an all-out battle with those alien bastards," he said, glancing up at the sky. "This is a sparring match in which I'd rather not **\*\*kill\*\*** a fellow Spartan."

Zeke smirked. "Practice like you play," he said.

"Yeah, 'practice like you play,' Blaine!" Jason joked.

Ezekiel watched as Blaine glanced at Jason, and then back at him. He shook his head, but wouldn't move. "I'm in no condition to fight." He said calmly.

Zeke was about to give a response when a whistle blew loudly outside the cage. He turned to see Corporal Charles watching them.

"You're both right." He said. Instantly, the three standing Spartans were at attention, but Zeke made a point not to move his boot from Victoria's spine. She was pinned, but still **\*\*far\*\*** from harmless. "At ease," he said.

Zeke let his arm drop. "Sir, we were instructed **\*\*never\*\*** to surrender, **\*\*period\*\***." He said plainly. He saw Blaine roll his eyes in his peripheral vision.

"That's true." He said. "But this time, we're making an exception." He glanced at Blaine, who looked relieved. "As we all know, Blaine has always had a **\*\*Hell\*\*** of a temper, and I think you'd all be wise not to work to provoke it."

Even Jason nodded at this point. Blaine had kept himself well under control, but in truth, even Ezekiel was frightened at the thought of him losing it.

"And," the Corporal continued, "the **\*\*real\*\*** reason I'm stopping you is that you three have been at it long enough anyway. If you want to continue this tomorrow, you're welcome to, but for today, it's time to let six more Spartans have their turn."

At this, Zeke finally took his right foot off of Victoria's back, and she coughed as she rolled over and glared at him. He cocked his head

and smiled at her wickedly.

"\*\*One day\*\*," she mumbled, rolling her eyes at him and standing up. As she walked out, Ezekiel grabbed the unconscious Magnus by his ankles and began dragging him.

"Come on, you freakin' monster." He grumbled, pulling harder. As he did so, Blaine grabbed a semi-conscious Christopher Stryker and helped him out, followed quickly by Jason.

"Tomorrow," Corporal Charles said as they left, "it's back to Weapons Training. Make sure you're dressed and ready at 0500."

Zeke nodded irritably, feeling Magnus' weight being drug behind him. "And I get to drag the damned \*\*elephant\*\*," he scowled, fully aware of the quarter-mile hike to the Recovery Building.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: So everyone knows, the majority of my chapters will not be this long. This was an exception, but I hope you all enjoyed it. I would appreciate reviews on this one and, if you can, please tell me what you all would prefer for me to do next. I have the 'October 20th' chapter written out almost entirely, and can skip right to that one next time, or I can do another chapter for the Weapons Training. It'll just be more examples of the Spartans, this time in the field. I promise to keep it interesting, but if you're all in a hurry to get to the Covenant, then I can skip it and keep going. It's really up to you all. Also, if I skip it, the next chapter can be up in a few days, since it's almost entirely written out.<strong>

\*\*Just be sure to review and let me know. I write for the readers, so leave me some feedback. Thanks a lot for reading!\*\*

## 15. Chapter 14: Lights Out

\*\*Author's Notes: Well, here's the next chapter. I decided the Weapons Training might not cut it, so I chose to go with something different. Next chapter will be October 20th. This one's even longer than the last one (I don't know if I can get them all this long, but I'll give it my best shot on those that I can). Now, to the Reviews:\*\*

\*\*zned51: Hey, it's been a while. First of all, you should know I have no problem with the critiquing and such. You've kept it polite, and for the good of the story, so why should I complain? As for what you actually said:\*\*

\*\*I've checked with a few of my readers, and neither they nor myself want a group of "Master Chief"s. (Most) Everyone is in agreement that they need personalities of their own in order for this not to become insanely boring, both to read and for me to write. And while they might seem like they "dislike" one-another, it's all just in fun. For example, the line you used where Ezekiel says, essentially, "you're on your own" isn't like he's condemning his teammate to a loss. It says right before that that they were "evenly matched." He's letting Jason work through the challenge himself, as opposed to fighting it for him when he really doesn't need the help.\*\*

\*\*And, in regards to their lack of..."focus," I guess I can call it, remember, the Master Chief and his squad were trained much longer than these Spartans have been. The idea for this story is that they'll mature and become better warriors as they go along due to their rushed schedule, as opposed to going into battle as "Gods of War," which, for all intensive purposes, is basically what the Spartan IIs were when they faced the Covenant.\*\*

\*\*Anything else you have, please, don't be a stranger. Trust me, I "stomp" on my work a lot harder than you have. ;)\*\*

\*\*numaman: Well, my friend, you wanted grenades and vehicles...I've got your good time RIGHT HERE. Let me know what you think.\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: The Cage-Fights are okay, but I'm hoping they're just about finished, minus a couple more. As for Zulu Company fighting off of Earth...well, yes, but you'll have to wait and see for the details. I hope you'll stick around.\*\*

\*\*GuardianXAngel: Thanks for the compliment. Also, the war with the Covenant will "begin" soon. As I said above, the next chapter will be October 20th, when the Covenant hit Earth. After that, I'll spend a few chapters on the second set of augmentations (and you all get to see what all the hype has been about), and then send them out to deal with the Covenant themselves. As for your question regarding the leader of the squad...well, the reason there's been so little so far is that they haven't been in a "real" situation requiring someone to take charge. Read this chapter, and then tell me what you think. ;) Also, I'll show a few of their "specialties" soon...the rest, you'll see in due time. Thanks again for your review.\*\*

\*\*1 way ticket: lol, "thanks for updating." Thank you for reviewing. ;) I'll see what I can do in the way of action for you and the 'other' (meaning male, lol) readers.\*\*

\*\*Trueshot159: Thanks very much for your review as well, and your take on the Spartan "friendships." I tell you what: give me just a few more chapters (like, into the augmentations), and then bring it up again, and tell me if you think they've matured enough to work as a single unit against the Covenant. As I said to zned51, I don't want them perfect yet, but I intend to get them closer as we go.  
\*\*

\*\*TheHuntedOne: Hey, I haven't heard from you in a while! Your review very much made my day, so thanks for that. As for what you said:\*\*

\*\*A, C, E: You liked that, huh? I look forward to what you think of this one then...\*\*

\*\*B: Just a LITTLE one. ;)\*\*

\*\*D: Thanks very much.\*\*

\*\*F, G, H: I don't know if they'll ALL be long...but I'll do my best. This next one should make you happy though, length-wise.\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: And, of course, my Halo-Expert and my toughest critic,

lol. My friend, if this last one was enough to make even you enjoy it, then I'm satisfied. I hope you like this one too. Everyone, this guy right here, he's my Halo-encyclopedia. Thank him for any details I got right, and, if I got them wrong...I probably forgot to run them by him. :)\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey, I looked through the chapter for the mistake you said you saw, but I couldn't find it. Perhaps, if there is one, you could quote the sentence that it came in? Or the paragraph? Just something for me to search for. I did look, but I couldn't find it. Thanks for reading though.\*\*

\*\*NOW, with those taken care of, on...to Chapter 14!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 14:<strong>

â€" \*\*Lights Out â€"\*\*

\*\*0200 Hours - August 16, 2552\*\*

\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Spartan Barracks\*\*

"Everybody up, \*\*now\*\*!"

The Corporal's voice tore through Blaine's dreams and he shot up in bed immediately, along with eighteen other now-conscious Spartans. He was shocked that the lights were still off, and the Corporal was waving a flashlight around.

"What time is it?" someone mumbled, still fatigued from Weapons Training that day. The Corporal didn't even turn toward the voice. A serious look consumed his face.

"Spartans, it's 0200. Now, all of you follow me, and no one speaks until we get to the Meeting Room."

They did as they were instructed, and Blaine felt a terrible feeling in the pit of his stomach. The Corporal's stricken face was a new one, and it gave him chills to see their commander with such a look.

Minutes later, they arrived in the Meeting Room, and the nineteen Spartans filed into a line as two Marines, also with flashlights, shut and locked the steel door behind them. The Corporal stood in front of the line of super-soldiers in silence for a few moments before he spoke.

"Spartans," he said solemnly, "we have a serious problem." He paused, tinges of fear creeping into his voice. "Let me start by telling you all that, for unknown reasons, all of Zulu Training Ground is without power, including all four of the backup generators."

Blaine was puzzled. Never before had they been pulled out of bed for a power-outage. He glanced around the darkened Meeting Room, from the stage, to the door, to the windowless walls on both sides of the room, and back to the stage. The shadows from the flashlights danced around the walls and ceiling, stopping every few seconds when the Marines did.

"Because of the complete loss of power, nearly every single electrical device on the **\*\*entire\*\*** training ground is nonfunctional, including-

The Corporal's speech was cut off by a man's scream, coming from somewhere outside the main building.

\_Sounded like it came from the Armory,\_ Blaine thought, his trained, tactical thoughts immediately superseding anything resembling emotion. He saw the other Spartans glance around the near-pitch-black room, and a few of them had their hands clenched at their sides, but apart from that, they seemed completely indifferent to the agonizing yell from a moment before.

"All you need to know," the Corporal continued, now louder and somewhat hurriedly, "is that the Covenant are among us."

Blaine felt his eyes grow wide. **\*\*Covenant? \*\*\_\_\*\*Here?\*\*\*\_ On \_\_\*\*Earth?\*\*\*\_**

The Corporal must have realized what he'd said and how it had been taken, because he started shaking his head as he lowered it slightly. "No," he clarified, "the Covenant have not **\*\*found\*\*** Earth. These are Covenant soldiers that were captured on another planet after their ships partially glassed it. They were trapped, pinned down, and captured. Anything we thought the Covenant could trace, we left, and we sedated them and brought them to a planet only a short distance from the one they were captured on. When the Covenant made no showing to pick them up within several months, we brought them closer to Earth."

He paused, catching his breath. "For several years, they were brought closer and closer, until they were finally brought to Earth itself. Once here, they were quarantined on Zulu Training Ground and used for research and," he made a quick glance at Zeke, "discipline."

Blaine had a vivid memory of that first day, of the time when the Corporal turned loose a white-armored Spec. Ops Elite on Ezekiel Veron. Granted, he'd also called the order to stop the beast from killing Ezekiel, but the damage was already sufficient to send him to Recovery for a little while.

"The Covenant soldiers were kept locked up behind an energy barrier of their own design underneath the Sparring Cage. For this reason, Zulu Training Ground has one main generator and four backups. The odds of them all going out at once areâ€|" he considered his words carefully, "slim."

Blaine sighed. \_Not slim enough,\_ he thought.

\* \* \*

>Samuel found himself having a hard time processing all of what was being said. Not only had humans brought Covenant to Earth, but they had "quarantined" them for years less than a mile from where the Spartans had been sleeping. <p>In addition, they were now free in the facility, and the lights were all but non-existent. This was fine for the Spartans, with enhanced visual acuity and hearing, but the everyday Marine would have a hard time functioning without additional

equipment.<p>

"Sir," Zeke's voice echoed from the far-right side of the line, "exactly how many Covenant soldiers are we dealing with here?"

The Corporal sighed. "We had ten Elites, sixteen Grunts, and seven Jackals penned up under the cage."

\_Thirty-three Covenant soldiers,\_ Samuel thought miserably, trying to picture how the groups would organize themselves.

"Unfortunately, that's not all."

Samuel found himself vaguely wondering what could **\*\*possibly\*\*** make the situation worse, unless a pair of Hunters were stored down there as well.

"These Covenant soldiers are armed."

Samuel felt the news hit him like a tidal wave, and he felt like he would fall over in shock.

The Corporal continued. "A few storage units were filled with Covenant weapons and were just down the hall from where they were being held."

"Well, that was **\*\*brilliant\*\***." Samuel's enhanced hearing picked up on Ezekiel's quiet whisper at the other end of the line, absolutely **\*\*dripping\*\*** with sarcasm.

"The chances of them getting free from their containment were thought to be non-existent. But when they did, they overpowered the Marines guarding them, since the Marines couldn't even locate them in the dark." The Corporal said. "With five generators spread so far apart, scientists predicted our chances of losing them all were a million to one."

Zeke's whispering voice came again. "Of **\*\*course\*\***, we **\*\*would\*\*** fall into that pesky point-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-zero-one."

"They're armed with a combination of Plasma Pistols, Plasma Rifles, Needlers, Covenant Carbines, and at least four Energy Swords. Also, expect them to be carrying Plasma Grenades." The Corporal finally stopped.

\_Wow,\_ Samuel thought, \_thirty-three armed Covenant soldiers, and we don't even know where they're at.\_

"One more thing, Spartans," The Corporal said, "You should be aware that we took several Covenant vehicles as well when we captured the soldiers. There are four Ghosts and a Banshee in the garage, a little over two miles from the main complex."

"Well, that's just **\*\*great\*\***." Samuel mumbled, wondering how much worse their odds were going to get before they left the Meeting Room. He was trying hard to think of a plan when Victoria's voice came from the line.

"What about their energy-shields?" She asked.

Finally, the Corporal smiled slightly. "That's our **\*\*one\*\*** stroke of luck," he said, "they're all wearing standard-issue Covenant-armor, but the only form of energy-shielding that they have are the wrist-held, circular shields that the seven Jackals will be carrying."

Samuel assessed the Spartans in the line around him. Each of them had been trained to be the world's greatest soldiers, and each had his or her own strengths to contribute to their defenses against the Covenant. No matter how great they were, however, they were going to need weapons.

"I've lost three soldiers already," Corporal Charles finished, "and I'm really not in a hurry to lose any more. I have my sidearm on me, and one of the two Marines here with us has an M6C Pistol as well. Together, I think we have eight shots. With that in mind, you should also know that the rest of the facility's weapons are in the Armory."

\* \* \*

>"We need weapons." Victoria said bluntly. The Spartans had formed a circle just off the stage and were quickly trying to formulate a plan. Unfortunately, they'd never before been in a situation where failure meant death, and no one had yet stood up to lead the attack.  
<p>Victoria was just considering making a plan herself, when Samuel surprised them all. He stepped into the center of the circle and began issuing instructions.<p>

"Alright," he said, sighing lightly, "**\*\*first\*\*** of all, I want Zeke and Blaine to go to the Armory. The sooner there's a rifle in your hands," he glanced at Zeke, and then to Blaine, "and rockets in yours, the **\*\*safer\*\*** I'll feel."

Ezekiel smirked dangerously and nodded. Blaine agreed as well, without question.

"Also, I want Chris and Kevin to go as well, and each bring back a bag with small arms for the rest of us." He looked directly at Christopher. "And remember, we don't need a bag full of Rocket Launchers and Fuel Rod Guns. I only want Blaine armed with explosives in case the Covenant beat us to the Ghosts in the garage." Samuel glanced for a moment at the Spartans around him. "The rest of us need smaller arms, preferably Assault Rifles, Battle Rifles, Shotguns, or Pistols. Grenades would be great too."

Victoria found herself stunned and pleased with how quickly and efficiently Samuel was dishing out the orders to the Spartans. For someone normally quiet and laid-back, he seemed to have a keen idea of exactly what he was doing.

"That reminds me," he said, seeking Landon out in the crowd, "I want you to take Jason and three other Spartans with you and go to the garage as fast as you can. If the Ghosts and the Banshee are still there, take them and get out of there ASAP."

Victoria saw Landon nod silently. He was as good a driver as anyone she'd ever seen, able to drive or pilot pretty much anything he'd ever laid eyes on. Jason was right there with him, and could even out-maneuver him in a couple of the aircrafts.

Samuel sighed loudly, preparing to speak again. Victoria watched his face wrinkle as a thought crossed his mind, but he quickly dismissed it and his focus returned to the Spartans around him.

"The rest of us will remain here with the Corporal and the other Marines." He said. "Chris and Kevin, get back here with those weapons as soon as you **\*\*possibly\*\*** can. Alright, everybody, that's it. **\*\*Go\*\***!"

\* \* \*

>Chris felt a chill as he stepped into the night air, following Ezekiel and the other seven Spartans in front of him out of the main building. Landon and Jason nodded to Blaine in silence, and then their group took off on a dead sprint for the garage. Chris watched them go in complete silence, barely able to believe the stealth with which they ran, never making a sound as they topped 55 kmh.

Suddenly, the remaining Spartans, Zeke, Blaine and Kevin, took off in the opposite direction, toward the Armory. Chris darted after them, his own steps masked in complete silence even as he caught up to them. They made the half-mile trip to the Armory in less than a minute, and stopped at the large, steel door at its front.

As Blaine started to open it, he stopped dead in his tracks, listening intently to something. The others stopped as well, and Chris could hear and smell something too. The smell was something he couldn't quite put his finger on, but the noise sounded almost like the wind.

\_No,\_ he thought, \_it's not the wind. It's too rhythmic. It's too controlled.\_

Blaine mouthed "breathing" as Chris slowly gravitated toward the side of the building. As he got closer, the smell grew stronger and clearer as well. In a second, he realized what it was.

\_Methane,\_ he thought bitterly, almost tasting the stench in the air.

Slowly, silently, he crept over to the very edge of the structure and looked around the corner. At that moment, he froze, barely believing his eyes.

He'd read all about the Covenant for years, even before being made a part of Zulu Company. Their weapons, armor, behavior and physical descriptions were nothing remotely new to him. But never before, except during his first day at the training ground, had he seen one in person.

There, not six feet away, was a blue-armored Grunt, hunched and leaning up against the wall, panting heavily. There was blue alien blood on the ground around him, and there were holes in both his armor and his methane-filled breathing device. The blood on the ground mixed with coolant from the creature's equipment and turned a strange, greenish hue.

Christopher didn't really know what to make of it, and in the two



seconds he spent checking the area for other hostiles before moving in, he wondered very seriously if this pitiful-looking creature was what they were really up against. Was this miserable excuse for a warrior what he'd be fighting later on?

A second later, he abandoned any thoughts on the creature's worth as a fighter and dashed at the five-foot alien. The Grunt turned toward him in horror, but before it could even **\*\*think\*\*** of drawing the Plasma Pistol fastened to its armor, Chris had reached his arm out and hoisted the creature into the air by its throat.

The Grunt gargled and flailed in pain as it attempted to get free, but Chris simply held it at chest-level, tilted the creature slightly, and snapped its neck with his free arm. He took the Plasma Pistol from its holster and also grabbed a Plasma Grenade from the alien's corpse before letting the lifeless body fall to the ground in a heap, all in total silence except the snapping of the creature's neck.

He walked back around the front, and found the door wide open. The other Spartans had already entered.

\* \* \*

>Blaine looked on in awe as he glanced around the first room they'd entered in the Armory. It had racks upon racks of light-weight human weapons, including Pistols, SMGs, Assault Rifles, Battle Rifles, and Shotguns, along with boxes of Fragmentation Grenades. "Wow," he whispered under his breath, waving his flashlight around as he looked for heavier weapons. <p>"Look what I found." Zeke said, holding up a pair of M90 Shotguns and tossing them lightly to Chris as he walked in. Blaine heard the other Spartan whistle quietly before placing them carefully into the bag.<p>

He watched as both Christopher and Kevin grabbed several Assault Rifles, a few Battle Rifles, and a half-dozen Pistols from the racks, along with extra clips for them all. Each of them grabbed a handful of grenades from the boxes, placed them in side-pockets on the bags, and moved on.

"Hey Blaine," Zeke said from across the room, next to the door they'd come in through, "let's go look for the bigger guns."

Zeke led the way back to the main hallway and through a door on their left. He opened it and went inside, and Blaine watched his flashlight catch glimpses of green and purple everywhere.

"So, this is where they keep the rest of the Covenant weapons." Blaine said, moving his flashlight around to see what was available.

"No wonder we weren't allowed in here as kids." Zeke joked as he found a row of Covenant Carbines and picked one up.

Blaine nodded and pointed to another door on the right side of the room from where they'd come in. He left Zeke alone and went inside, only to find himself surrounded on all sides by manmade heavy weapons.

There were Sniper Rifles, dismounted machinegun turrets, two Rocket

Launchers in the corner, and a row of huge, awkward-looking cannons he'd never seen before, labeled **\*\*WAV M6 GGNR\*\***.

"But no rockets," he growled bitterly, looking all around for ammunition for the launchers. When he was sure he'd looked everywhere and could find none, he went back into the room where he'd left Ezekiel, only to find his fellow Spartan staring into a large steel cabinet.

"Zeke, I found your--"

"Quiet," he snapped. Zeke put his finger up to his mouth and shushed Blaine harshly, then pointed to the cabinet mounted to the wall.

Blaine had to move to the side to see inside it, and instantly wished he hadn't.

Above the cabinet, in bold, red letters, were the words **\*\*Covenant Heavy Weapon: Fuel Rod Gun\*\***.

The entire room was spotless, and a Covenant weapon sat neatly in every open holder available. In every row, Covenant arms and ammo were abundant...

...except for the cabinet the two of them were looking at; inside it, ten empty mounts stared back at the two Spartans.

"Oh shit," Blaine said.

\* \* \*

>Victoria braced herself against a table as a third explosion rattled the walls of the Meeting Room. Several Spartans lost their balance and fell as the room shook like they were in the middle of an earthquake. <p>"How much longer will these walls hold up?" Stephanie yelled from the floor as yet another explosion hit the east-wall.<p>

Victoria watched as Magnus stood up and ran over to the wall, and placed his hand on it carefully. He drew it back in a split-second later.

"They're white-hot," he said, rubbing his hand, "whatever they're shooting, it's plasma-based and it's big." He paused a moment, then added, "I'm thinking Fuel Rod Guns."

The Corporal started to walk toward them, but fell as a fifth shot hit the wall and shook the structure yet again. "Those walls won't last much longer," he said, "I'd give them five more minutes, at the most."

Victoria couldn't believe the situation they'd found themselves in. The Covenant were outside, pounding away at the wall with Fuel Rod Guns, and when Samuel had decided to try going out through the door to the Meeting Room, he was greeted by red-hot plasma from both sides.

One of the Marines tapped her on the shoulder.

"Yes?"

"There's a second door, underneath the stage. It connects to the basement just beneath the barracks." He said. "Normally, the floor opens up electronically, but since the power's out, we can't open it. I was wondering if, maybe, one of you Spartans can."

Victoria smiled briefly. **\*\*Finally\*\***, a break, she thought, and looked for either Samuel or Magnus. Magnus was closer, and she rushed over to him.

"Hey Goliath," she said kindly, "I need a favor."

\* \* \*

>Ezekiel fastened the Sniper Rifle to his back as fast as he could, using the shoulder-strap and tightening it so much that the rifle budged only as a response to the steps he took, and only by millimeters. <p>"I should be going with you." Blaine said. Ezekiel shook his head.<p>

"You need to find the damned rockets," he said. "If the Covenant beat us to the Ghosts, we'll have nothing we can even **\*\*touch\*\*** them with."

Blaine nodded, disappointed, and went back to searching as Ezekiel made his way back to the room lined with Covenant weapons.

He darted through the room, stopping just long enough to snatch two Plasma Grenades out of a box and fasten them to makeshift holsters on his thigh.

Next, he went back to the first room they'd entered and looked around. "I'll have one of these," he said, picking up a Pistol, "and two of those." He got two Fragmentation Grenades from a box against the wall. "That's everything." He said, and ran outside, into the night.

He heard an explosion and turned toward the main building just in time to see the last flash of a ball of green plasma as it hit the wall of the building. Without another thought, he sped through the sand, to the complex, and around the side, until he could see the Covenant soldiers on the ground.

Ezekiel was running too fast to stop immediately, so he put one leg out in front and slid down into the sand, kicking up a large cloud of it and pulling the Sniper Rifle to bear as he did so.

The second the sand cleared, he flicked on the night-vision on the rifle and focused in on one of the six Elites standing outside the building. He made out one white-armored Elite, a red-armored one, and four blue-armored, "private" level Elites, all in command of eleven Grunts.

**\*\*Eight\*\*** of which were wielding Fuel Rod Guns.

Ezekiel found one Covenant soldier in his scope and pulled the trigger.

CRACK!

The bullet traveled the hundred-and-fifty yards to the Elite in a split-second, traveled through the creature's chest, and left it flailing on the ground, gasping for air and coughing up blue alien blood.

The response was immediate. Two Elites brought Fuel Rod Guns of their own to bear and began blasting madly into the darkness in Ezekiel's direction. The seven Grunts who didn't panic after watching the Elite fall pointed their weapons and did the same.

"Damn it!" Zeke cursed as the green balls of energy expanded and arched toward him from above. They weren't fired right at him, but the heat alone was enough to move him from his spot. The spots where the plasma had actually connected were melted into glass in seconds.

He went back to his scope and sighted in on another Elite. The white one had vanished, taking two of the Grunts with him, but the others still remained.

CRACK!

The shot tore through the air, but the Elite had been facing away from Ezekiel, and it turned just in time, causing the bullet to tear one of its four mandibles right off its face.

The creature roared so loudly that Zeke could make it out all the way from his position, and it ducked behind the building, leaving a trail of blood behind it.

Instantly, the Grunts were at it again, firing round after round of big, green plasma-bolts from their shoulder-mounted cannons. The sheer number of the shots caused a few to get close, and Ezekiel made a mad dash closer to the Grunts, and away from the shots.

He went back to his scope, found an Elite, and focused in on its big, reptilian head. Carefully, he centered in on the creature's forehead, and was about to pull the trigger when he heard gunfire and watched a few of the Grunts fall down in pools of blood.

Ezekiel lowered the zoom on the rifle to 5x-scope and was instantly relieved. Christopher and Kevin must've found the other Spartans, because before the Covenant knew what hit them, a dozen Spartan super-soldiers had come running around the building, circling behind them, carrying a mix of Battle Rifles and Assault Rifles. In only a few short seconds, each of the Covenant soldiers outside had been completely mowed down.

Zeke could hear the cheering as the Spartans searched the area for additional aliens. He was about to join in when he saw something coming over the hills of sand that sent chills up his spine.

From the east, over the sand dunes, he could make out the fluorescent-blue outline of the thrusters of four Ghosts that were speeding toward the group of lightly-armed Spartans, their anti-gravity propulsion systems working in overdrive to get them there as fast as possible.

"Spartans!" he yelled, but knew that they'd never hear him. He did

the only thing he could think of, and brought the rifle to bear.

\* \* \*

>Magnus could hear the Marines celebrating, along with a couple of Spartans, as they kicked the corpses of the fallen Covenant soldiers. He almost felt like joining them, but knew, in the back of his mind, that there were more out there. <p>"Come on, you monster, crack a smile!" A Marine said, tapping him on the shoulder. He was about to respond when something caught his attention. He could hear something faint, in the distance. It was a quiet humming noise.<p>

He turned away from the main building to see four blue lights coming over the top of a high dune.

CRACK!

Another shot rang from what was no doubt Ezekiel's position off to his right. First there was an alien scream, and then one of the lights vanished.

"Oh no," he said quietly, realizing, "\*\*\*Ghosts\*\*!"

The rest of the Spartans took off for the building, but realized too late that the Covenant soldiers who went inside to avoid Ezekiel's Sniper Rifle had barricaded the door behind them. As the Ghosts drew nearer, Magnus realized they were trapped with nothing but small arms to defend themselves.

"Everyone fire, right \*\*now\*\*!" Magnus said, leveling his Battle Rifle at the Ghost farthest left. Immediately, he couldn't see or hear much of anything over the flashes of light and thundering cracks coming from the muzzles of the guns. Barely, he was able to see that one of the Ghosts had stopped, its driver taken out by the hail of bullets.

The other two, however, kept coming, and were less than thirty yards away when one of them exploded in a haze of blue smoke as a wave of bullets impacted it from the Spartans' left side. Magnus turned to see Landon in the driver's seat of a Warthog with Jason mounting the chain-gun on the back.

He smiled as Landon drove straight for the other Ghost, turning the wheel hard to the left and slamming the brake right before hitting it, causing the Warthog's back end to slide into the smaller vehicle, rolling it over several times in the sand and injuring its red-armored Elite driver.

Another Warthog came up behind the injured Elite, its headlights and horn both blaring as it ran the reptilian alien straight into the sand.

"Hell yeah!" Landon yelled as he drove up to the other Spartans, power-sliding to stop just in front of them.

Jason hopped down from the gun on the back. "Sorry we're late."

Magnus smiled briefly. \*\*Somehow\*\*, they'd survived the Ghosts' attack. Landon stepped out of the Warthog and walked up to him.

"The other three are in the other Warthog," he said, motioning to the vehicle out in the sand coming slowly toward them. "That one doesn't have a gun, but it'll hold several Spartans in the back."

"Well, you can't beat-"

Jason started to speak, but Magnus couldn't hear him. He'd thought, a second before, that he'd heard something, but couldn't make anything out. Now, he saw a bright green flash in the sky above them, and he knew instantly what he was missing. He grabbed Jason and Landon by their shirt-collars and used all his strength to throw them both away from the Warthog, diving as well just before it exploded in a flash of green light.

He looked up just in time to see the Banshee starting to circle around for a second strike.

\* \* \*

>Zeke couldn't believe how bad their luck had been. Not only had the Covenant gotten a hold of the Ghosts, but now the Banshee was circling around, preparing to wipe out the whole group with its enormous Fuel Rod Gun. <p>He looked at the rifle in his hands. It was reloaded, so he had four good shots with it, but there was no way he was going to take down a Banshee that way. He needed explosives or a chain-gun, and he had neither.<p>

He watched as the Spartans on the ground scattered, shooting back while trying to find somewhere to hide from the flying plasma-launcher. When it was half-way circled around, he knew there wasn't any other choice. He looked straight up toward Heaven, as he'd always done. "Hilarious," he said sarcastically, "even I didn't see this one coming," then he leveled the rifle.

CRACK!

A shot hit the side of the Covenant flier, causing it to wobble slightly in the air and shoot a small amount of blue smoke from its back, but nothing more.

CRACK!

The second shot hit the back of the vehicle, blasting one of the glowing blue thrusters into pieces. It wouldn't be enough to destroy the vehicle, he knew, but maybe irritating the pilot might buy the others some time.

CRACK!

Another shot hit the same wing of the Banshee, knocking it clean off and letting it fall to the sand fifty-feet below. The Banshee hesitated to complete its circle, facing Ezekiel's position.

CRACK!

The fourth and final shot in the clip hit the other anti-gravity thruster and shattered it. Unfortunately, this wouldn't be enough to bring the vehicle to the ground, only slow it down.

But it was enough to cause the pilot to ignore the remaining Spartans in hopes of frying the annoying human chipping away at his ship.

"That's right, lizard-lips," Zeke yelled, "come and get me!" He took off running in the opposite direction and heard the whine of the twin plasma cannons firing from the Banshee's front. He was only vaguely aware of the sand being melded to glass mere feet behind him.

He risked a glance back just in time to see a single plasma-bolt coming straight for him and jumped sideways in an effort to get away from it. At the same time he felt his back hit the sand, he felt his left leg being burned by the very edges of the compressed plasma.

Ezekiel fought the urge to yell and collapsed onto the ground. He forced himself up, but couldn't move his burnt leg enough to do anything but limp. There were screams and yells from the Spartans back at the barracks, but he could only barely hear them. He was too focused on the Banshee that had now passed over him and was doing a loop in the air, turning around.

"Well, this is it." He said quietly, grabbing one of the Plasma Grenades from his waist. "Nice knowing you all."

The Banshee finished its loop and began firing again. He watched as the twin plasma-bolts hit the sand twenty-feet in front of him; and then fifteen feet, and then twelve, then ten.

He was spinning the grenade in his hand and was looking up when the Banshee simply exploded, a huge, red beam of energy engulfing the cockpit, coming from somewhere to Ezekiel's right. As the charred pieces of the still-glowing Banshee fell to the ground, he looked over to the source, squinting in the darkness.

And he couldn't help but smile.

On the roof of the Armory, Blaine Everson was crouched low, holding some kind of cannon on his shoulder.

"Go to Hell you \*\*ugly, overgrown\*\* \*\*salamander\*\*!" His voice carried all the way to Ezekiel and to the main building.

\* \* \*

>Victoria poked her head silently around the corner of the almost-pitch-black hallway. She'd led two other Spartans inside with her, but they were separated when two Elites started unloading on them with dual-wielded Plasma Rifles. <p>Now, she had to be even more careful. She'd already sent three Jackals and a pair of Grunts to Hell with the Shotgun in her hands, and their deaths were <strong>far<strong> from quiet.

She started to inch around the corner, but stopped when she heard something further down the hall. It was steady, rhythmic.

Breathing.

She peeked around the corner and was able to make out two Grunts and a red-armored Elite standing at the far end. The Elite turned away from her, apparently growling and snarling at something around the next corner.

In a second, she gathered her resolve and made the choice to fasten the shotgun on her back. As she did so, she drew the Pistol she'd been carrying from the holster on her waist and primed a Fragmentation Grenade.

She reached out and threw it down the hall, causing shrapnel to fly in all directions. The Grunts screamed and panicked, and she rounded the corner at a dead run, only to see the two little aliens running toward her, both of their hands glowing bright-blue!

"Oh, damn!" She said, bringing the Pistol up and shooting them both right between their glowing red eyes. They hit the ground several meters from her, and four blue explosions went off, one right after another.

Victoria closed her eyes for a split-second, gathering every ounce of her courage, and charged through the blue smoke billowing up from the explosions. She jumped as high as she could and felt her legs being singed by the radiating heat from the explosions. As she expected, the Elite was crouched low, sheltering itself from the explosion, and didn't see her coming down on it until it was too late.

The creature arched its neck back to look up just in time for her boot to come crashing down on its head, driving it down into the concrete and smashing its skull with her momentum and pure leg-strength.

She looked around the next corner and saw no Covenant, and took a few seconds to rest. Her legs burned from the grenades, and fatigue had already begun to set in. She closed her eyes for just a moment.

And she heard it: a slow, quiet clicking noise.

Mandibles.

She put the Pistol away and readied her Shotgun, looking back around the corner, into the dark.

Nothing.

She looked back the way she'd come, but still could find nothing to explain the clicking that sounded like it was practically on top of her.

Suddenly, a white-hot blade of pure energy materialized out of thin air in front of her, and she leapt back just in time to avoid being sliced to ribbons. Unfortunately, she failed to pull back the Shotgun in time, and it was cut at an angle and suddenly useless to her.

The Elite materialized next, its active-camouflage deactivating and revealing its white armor. The glowing Energy Sword through demonic-looking shadows upon the walls as the Elite snarled and clicked its mandibles. It stepped toward her slowly, holding the blade at its side.



She threw the Shotgun to the ground and pulled out her Pistol. She leveled it at the Elite and fired several shots, but as she did so, both the Elite and the sword vanished into the darkness, the active-camouflage bending the light around it and making it nearly impossible for her to locate.

She walked slowly backwards, feeling cold chills go up and down her spine, into her legs and her neck. The Elite was right there, she could feel it.

Victoria saw the outline just in time and ducked as the Energy Sword materialized and sliced through the air where her head had just been. The Elite appeared as well, and lunged at her, swinging the blade wildly. She pulled back, leveled the Pistol, and pulled the trigger.

CRACK!

The first shot hit the Elite's arm, and it kept coming.

CRACK!

This one hit the alien in the side of the head, ricocheting off its helmet.

CLICK!

Victoria realized immediately that she'd used all twelve of her shots. She threw the Pistol down and dodged right to avoid another swing by the Covenant soldier.

The white-armored Elite growled again and lunged at her.

\_Not this time,\_ she thought, dodging to the left as she pulled a Plasma Grenade from her waist. She primed it, and stuck it to the alien's chest as it dove past her.

She could smell the flesh burning as the Elite dropped the blade and looked at its chest. It looked right at her and let out a horrible, agonizing roar as it charged. Victoria, however, knew what to expect, and dove around the corner before the kamikaze-Covenant could reach her.

There was an explosion that lit up the hallway, and burning alien flesh flew onto the walls, sticking and sliding slowly down to the ground.

Victoria collapsed onto the ground. She was done. The Elites were dead, and her body was finished for the night.

"Thank God," she said, looking up at the ceiling, masked in the darkness. Suddenly, she heard a low, hissing and squawking sound. "Oh Hell," she said, "can't I catch a break?"

She watched the four Jackals inch around the corner, protected by each other's wrist-mounted plasma shields, which glowed dull green in the darkness. They each moved their free hands to the small holes in the shields, armed with glowing Plasma Pistols.

Victoria went back around the corner, and collapsed again. She simply

couldn't make her body move any further. She was unarmed, out of grenades, and extremely fatigued. And, to make matters worse, she could hear the Jackals inching closer.

She looked around for something, anything to use as a weapon. Finally, she saw the handle of the Energy Sword the white-armored Elite had been carrying. She picked it up and activated it, feeling the white-hot blade pulsating before her.

\_Still,\_ she thought, \_there's \_\_\*\*no \*\*\_\_\*\*way\*\*\_\_ I'll be able to take them on without being killed. There are four of them, and I've got to get right in close even to take a shot.\_

At that moment, there was an explosion in the hall she'd just come from, and the mutilated bodies of Jackals flew together with jagged pieces of shrapnel into the wall to her right. She watched as bits and pieces of them fell to the floor.

"Victoria," Samuel's voice echoed, "Are you okay?"

The relief was incredible. She felt like the whole world was suddenly lifted off her shoulders.

"I'm over here!" She said loudly.

A moment later, Samuel rounded the corner, smiled lightly, and lifted her up to carry her out.

## 16. Chapter 15: Oct 20: The Attack On Earth

**\*\*Author's Notes:** First off, I apologize for any misunderstandings about when I would post this. When I said the next chapter would be October 20th, I meant that it would take place on the day the Covenant landed on Earth in 2552 (Halo 2 players will know exactly what I'm talking about). And, for those of you who asked me to post the next chapter faster, I really am sorry. I'd love to get them out faster, but between college applications, PSEO college-work, and Calculus, I simply lack the time. After my ten-week class and apps. are finished, count on me turning out two or more on the average week. Until then, please, bear with me.\*\*

**\*\*Now,** before I answer reviews, let me say that the ones I received were excellent, and I thank everyone who reviewed very, very much for responding. I love writing this (most of the time), but it's always better if I know whether or not people are enjoying it. This chapter won't be the "action-packed" episode the last one was, but you know how it goes. I have to get through the technical details before I can get to the war. So...onto the reviews:\*\*

**\*\*GuardianXAngel:** Thanks for reviewing! I hope you and everyone enjoys the second set of augmentations. I wanted to do something a little different, and between the augmentations and their armor, I think I'll have plenty of originality to work with. Hope you'll review again.\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey, I do appreciate a careful eye and your input, but I checked what you mentioned. Perhaps I typed the sentence in a confusing manner, but it's not just in past-tense, it's in past-participle (I think that's what it's called...someone go ahead

and correct me if I'm wrong), which is why the word "had" is used twice. Thanks though, and I'd like to hear your input on the story as we go on.\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Hey, glad you liked that one. I thought you might enjoy the Spartan Laser. I promise, I'll give him a Missile Launcher before it's over. And, for the record, you deserved props. My "splendid writing" wouldn't do very well if I messed up every other detail.\*\*

\*\*TheHuntedOne: lol, here we go:\*\*

\*\*A, B, C: I wish I could get them out sooner (which seems to be what a great majority of people want), but I promise, I'm doing the best I can. If that's not what you wanted...well, sorry. Tell me and I'll see what I can do.\*\*

\*\*D, F, G: Thanks very much. It's one of the few chapters I'm actually very happy with.\*\*

\*\*E: Sorry...I don't do well writing relationships. Forgive me if I shy away from that.\*\*

\*\*H: SPARTAN FREAKIN' LASER! MWAHAHAHA! (Calm now) Hope you'll keep reading.\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: Yep, I thought I'd give you little bits of what their specialties will end up. Don't think you know it all yet, though. Also, sorry if you thought I was posting on the 20th. I was going to try, but...didn't make it. Thanks for the compliments though!\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: Hey, thanks for the review. I appreciate the positive comments. Trust me, the Covies are in for a whole lot of beatings before it's all said and done. \*\*

\*\*1 way ticket: Hehehehe...glad you enjoyed that one. lol, I hope your dad got a kick out of it too! Thanks.\*\*

\*\*numaman: Hey, I expected you to comment sooner, slacker! Just kidding. Thanks for the review. I hope I was wrong about this one in Calculus, but I trust you'll let me know. Later.\*\*

\*\*NOW, to the story. Chapter 15 starts...now!\*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><p>

\*\*Chapter 15:\*\*

\*\* - Oct. 20: The Attack On Earth - \*\*

\*\*1300 Hours - October 20, 2552\*\*

\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Meeting Room\*\*

Magnus watched the monitor in horror as the Scarab trampled the city

of New Mombassa, destroying **everything** in its wake. Even as it began to turn, he had trouble grasping just how huge the Covenant craft was. Each of its four legs topped ninety-feet-tall, and it was easily more than a hundred feet long, from its large green 'eye' at one end to the raised plasma turret at the other.

\_Now I know why the Egyptians considered the damned things  
\_\_**Gods,**\_ he thought as the Scarab finished a ninety-degree turn toward another street, and its 'eye' began to glow a brighter green as the four metal 'flaps' encasing it lifted. \_What the-\_

The Scarab fired, sending a **massive** green beam of superheated plasma through an entire city block. Magnus watched as the monitor switched camera-angles, and there were gasps around him when it revealed the devastation.

Four large, skyscraper-height buildings had been reduced to nothing but molten rubble, and everything around them had shared a similar fate. The camera pulled back to show that the destruction spread past the Scarab's initial targets, including destroyed roads and a bridge almost a half-mile from the Covenant vehicle.

"There's nothing left." Stephanie's voice barely registered as Magnus continued to stare at the very little that remained. The Scarab had done so much damage, and in only one strike! The spot where the gun had impacted was literally nothing but rock and melded glass, and every piece of architecture nearby was in only slightly better shape.

The Spartans had been called to the Meeting Room only an hour before, and General Malone had filled them in on the details. He told them that, in short, Earth's **worst** nightmare had arrived: the Covenant had landed. Earlier, they had entered the immediate space around the planet and sent a barrage of boarding parties to destroy Earth's only real defenses: the enormous MAC Guns in orbit around it.

A short time later, a single Covenant Assault Carrier sped through the debris field of one destroyed MAC station, the Malta, made it through the atmosphere, and stopped in Africa, above New Mombassa.

And that was the time the Spartans had been called from their daily routine, only a few minutes after the Covenant 'landed' on Earth. Now, they'd been watching the attack intently, and the Covenant truly did look indestructible. The Marines had used rockets, 50-caliber rounds, and Scorpion Main Battle Tanks against the Scarab, and it had taken one out right after another without so much as a scratch. It blasted anything and everything the UNSC could throw at it without even slowing down.

Magnus felt his heart speed up as a lone Scorpion Tank sitting on the highway between the Scarab and the city waterways was reduced to nothing by the Covenant craft's main gun. With excess coolant and plasma still dripping from its 'eye,' the Scarab began walking again, climbing over buildings and bridges without a second thought.

"This is insane." He mumbled as the Scarab moved onward, until it was moving in the waterway, barely low enough to miss the small bridges suspended above it. He looked on in silence after that, until something caught his eye.

There, on one of the bridges, stood a single soldier in green-clad, full-body armor, easily seven-feet tall. Magnus could make out an M90 Shotgun in his hands.

Suddenly, as the Scarab passed beneath him, he leapt clean off the bridge and landed on the metal monster's "back," which was flat and raised up to serve as an "upper deck" for Covenant soldiers. When he hit, Magnus wished the camera would move in closer, as he barely made out the shapes of Covenant Elites, Grunts and Jackals scattering in all directions.

"It's him!" Samuel started beside him, then paused in a gasp. "There's no way."

Magnus watched as the green-armored soldier single-handedly eliminated the Covenant resistance atop the Scarab, blasting Elites with the Shotgun and sticking multiple Grunts with Covenant-style Plasma Grenades.

"It's Spartan 117." Samuel said. "It's the Master Chief."

At that moment, the Master Chief vanished from the bird's-eye-view of the Scarab on the monitor as he ran down into the monster's innards.

"I didn't even catch him shooting a few of them." Stephanie said in awe as the camera focused in on the dead bodies of Covenant littering the deck.

Magnus was in shock. Ever since the members of Zulu Company had had their first augmentations performed, they'd been told stories of the Spartan II's, the finest soldiers ever to grace the Human/Covenant War. More so, they'd been told of one soldier in particular who had led a team of these super-soldiers, and his identification was Spartan 117: the Master Chief. Just today, they learned a few things about his trip to what the UNSC called a Halo, where he battled Covenant on unimaginable fronts.

"It's unbelievable." Blaine said as the camera switched angles again.

"Well, that would explain the stories we-

There was an explosion in New Mombassa that echoed through the loudspeakers in the Meeting Room with frightening force, shaking the entire room and causing the Spartans to glance around in shock.

Magnus turned back to the monitor as the camera centered once again on the Scarab, which had begun to collapse on its four legs as blue smoke and steam shot up from its joints and green coolant leaked freely from its main gun. He watched as the 'eye' quickly went from its normal, bright-green color to a much duller hue as more and more liquid dripped down from it, into the waterways of New Mombassa.

A second later, the Scarab collapsed entirely. With the metal monster's body no longer being supported by the legs, the front angled downward, until it nearly touched the cold floor of the city. As it did so, the Master Chief walked slowly down from its back, a

Shotgun held loosely at his side, pointed at the ground. From what Magnus could see from the camera's view, he didn't have a scratch on him.

Blaine let out a low whistle. "Talk about a badass." He said.

Magnus felt himself nod in awe.

\* \* \*

>Stephanie watched the camera move around as a Pelican touched down and picked up the Master Chief. Just as it started to lift off, the camera switched views to observe the Covenant Assault Carrier hovering above the city. According to what the Spartans had been told, the military believed there to be a Covenant Prophet aboard. <p>The camera shifted again to watch <em>In Amber Clad<em>, a UNSC Frigate flying above the city and the same one the Master Chief was headed for. A second later, the ship disappeared from focus as the engines both came on and it launched forward. Stephanie could hear what sounded almost like static coming loudly over the speakers.

Once again, the viewpoint changed on the monitor and she realized that it wasn't static; it was **\*\*wind\*\***. People, vehicles, and small structures were all being blown toward the Covenant Carrier with horrible force, and the only sound to drown them out was the screeching of metal scraping metal.

"What's go-"

This time, the monitor changed to show the Assault Carrier, and Stephanie immediately realized that something was **\*\*terribly\*\*** wrong. The sky in front of the Covenant ship had formed a glowing circle that seemed to arc away from the Carrier. A second later, the sky parted, showing a void, and the Assault Carrier started to drift into it, nose-first.

As it did so, Stephanie watched everything not nailed-down in New Mombassa be pulled mercilessly toward the void. She gasped as she watched people and equipment be tossed around like they were in a hurricane.

"It's a Slipspace jump," someone whispered from down the line. Stephanie only barely heard it, and didn't work to see who it had come from.

As the Carrier's back end approached the void, In Amber Clad flew right beside it, into the rift. It looked almost pathetic, Stephanie thought, to watch the tiny, 1500-foot long UNSC Frigate fly next to an enormous Covenant Assault Carrier better than three-miles long.

Seconds later, the last of the Carrier vanished into the rift, and Stephanie could only watch in horror as a **\*\*new\*\*** level of destruction surfaced. A dome of light covered the entire area of New Mombassa, and the sounds of explosions echoed until they were finally overshadowed by one massive, earth-shattering blast.

Stephanie, even as an adult Spartan, covered her mouth in shock when the light finally died down from its blinding shine. All she could

see were rubble and metal and ash where the city once stood.

The waterways were **\*\*obliterated\*\***.

The once-grand skyscrapers were reduced to **\*\*nothing\*\***.

New Mombassa was **\*\*gone\*\***. There was nothing left.

Stephanie only barely picked up Samuel's voice from behind her, coming out in gasps. "God be with us all." He said.

\* \* \*

>"As you've all just witnessed," the General started, "Earth has been discovered. **<strong>We<strong>** have been discovered." He was addressing the Spartans after the Covenant's Assault Carrier disappeared into Slipspace and all remaining cameras were lost to the explosion. "With that in mind, ladies and gentlemen, our days are numbered."

Zeke was trying to listen to what General Malone had to say, but at the same time, he couldn't help but let his thoughts stray back to the monstrous Scarab that had taken so many lives in such short a time.

\_And with such **\_\_\*\*ease,\*\***\_ he thought, reflecting on how the Scarab's main gun had destroyed more than a city block without even slowing down. He pictured the huge, bright-green beam as it torched the entire area. **\_They didn't even have to **\_\_\*\*try.\*\***\_**

The General cleared his throat, bringing the Spartans whose minds had wandered back to the speech. "The Covenant hit Reach with a fleet **\*\*fifty-times\*\*** as large as the one that just came to Earth." He said. "God knows, they'll be back. And, next time, I'm betting they hit a **\*\*Hell\*\*** of a lot harder."

Ezekiel felt his heart-rate quicken slightly. **\_They'll be **\_\_\*\*back,\*\***\_** he thought uneasily, **\_and next time, we're going to need more than the Master Chief to stop them.\_** He paused for a second, pondering the idea, before he came to a worse conclusion. **\_Unless, next time, they simply decide to **\_\_\*\*glass\*\***\_ the planet and be done with it.\_**

"And," the General continued, in a somewhat lighter voice, "I see you all got your first look at Spartan 117: the Master Chief."

Immediately, Zeke's attention returned completely to the conversation at hand. General Malone had mentioned what was, in all likelihood, Earth's **\*\*best\*\*** chance of survival: Spartan 117.

"Now, I won't make any promises, but if things go according to plan, each and every one of you will not only be able to **\*\*compete\*\*** with the Master Chief at a physical level, but you will **\*\*surpass\*\*** him. As of this moment, you've all been exposed to the same augmentations he was, and your bodies and minds reflect that." He smiled slightly, then added, "Tactically, you're a little on the shallow side, but you've only fought the Covenant once. I have full confidence that each of you alone will be more than an entire **\*\*squad\*\*** of Covenant can handle, and together, you'll be more destructive than atomic

weapons, MAC Guns, or anything else we have available to us right now."

At first, Ezekiel was enjoying the pep-talk, but quickly grew bored with it when he realized its only purpose was to boost morale. He found his mind once again wandering back to what they'd all seen on the monitor only moments before. **How?** He asked silently, **how** could they possibly do so much damage in such a short time-span, and using only minimal troops, the world's largest **bug**, and an order to **retreat**, **of all things?**

"And that's why your schedules have been bumped up."

Zeke snapped back out of his thoughts, puzzled. He turned to Victoria. "What'd he say?"

Victoria just shrugged.

"Your augmentation schedules," the General clarified, "My superiors and I believe that, in light of recent events, the time has come for your second set of augmentations."

Ezekiel was stunned. It was only six months previous that they'd had their **first** set of augmentations performed.

"For the next two days, I don't want you Spartans to do anything **remotely** strenuous." The General said. "Just eat, relax, and maybe do some light lifting or sparring. But I want all of you at your best, because, in 48 hours, you undergo the greatest scientific test of them all, and what will likely be your greatest challenge as Spartans."

Against every bone in his body and against the very fabric of his being, Ezekiel Veron, a Spartan, felt a terrible chill go up his spine. **One-hundred and seventy-five attempts,** he thought, **and zero** successes.

\* \* \*

><p><p>

"These are all of them?" Corporal Charles asked the scientist at the desk in front of him. He was in the Recovery Building, which was again to serve as the building the augmentations would be done in.

"That's each of the procedures, yes." The man in front of him answered.

The Corporal looked at the small stack of paper in his hands. There were nineteen pages, each one dedicated to a Spartan and his or her upcoming augmentation procedure. There were four main augmentation procedures, labeled **Cybernetic Enhancement**, **Increased Growth Stimulation**, **Defensive Implantation**, **and DNA Alteration**.

"Only four?" the Corporal asked, puzzled.

The scientist looked up from his paperwork, looking annoyed. **Yes**, he said bitterly, "those are the four we decided upon. The rest had too great a failure-rate."



For a second, Charles was happy. They were only going to approve the augmentations with the highest rates of success. "What are the estimated success-rates for the four that are approved?"

The man didn't even look up from the desk. "The general success ratio for each procedure is at the bottom of any page it's listed on."

The Corporal turned through the pages, looking at each individual procedure.

And he nearly flipped, looking at the number.

The best success rates were those of the **Defensive Implantation** and **Increased Growth Stimulation**, at 35-percent and 33-percent, respectively. That's **ridiculous**, he thought, looking at them again. It's **insane**. He flipped through the pages until he hit another procedure.

The next one was **DNA Alteration**, with a 12-percent success rate. The Corporal had to work to stop himself from verbally attacking the scientist. "Twelve percent?" he asked. "What the **Hell** have your scientists been working on for the last **decade**? One of the best four procedures has a success rate of **just** better than one-in-ten?"

Suddenly, the scientist across from him stood up. "Sir, I know it's less than we'd hoped for, but we **needed** the last of the tests to come in." He said coldly. "A great deal of our final set of tests was dedicated to the DNA-based procedures, and estimates place our success rates in the upper 40-percent after they're finished."

The Corporal scowled, knowing the futility of the idea of waiting. The Covenant had hit Earth, and now they needed more time. He looked at the last of the procedures, labeled **Cybernetic Enhancement**.

"Twenty percent," he said, examining the numbers. The scientist nodded.

"Sir, if we could just get another month--"

"I can't get you another month." The Corporal said. "Malone has already made the call that the Spartans are to be augmented the day after tomorrow."

The man literally fell back into his seat. **What**?

"They're being performed on the 22nd of October." The Corporal clarified, still looking at the notes.

The scientist still looked stunned. "I was informed that they were to be augmented soon, but **not** in two days." He said. "We can't get the building ready for procedures of this magnitude in a day and a half. There's no way."

\* \* \*

><em>Two days,<em> Samuel thought. He was lying on his bunk, looking up at the ceiling. Ezekiel and Jason were the only other two in the

Spartans' sleeping quarters. He rolled over slightly to Jason sitting on his bottom bunk, a half-dozen beds down, looking at his hands.

"What's on your mind, Jason?" He asked.

The younger Spartan looked up. "Wondering what I'm going to be when this is all over." He said. "I just pray I don't end up a robot like Ezekiel." Jason then put his arms out in front of him and made a Frankenstein imitation.

"Hilarious, Jason," Zeke's voice came from the bunk beneath Samuel's. "But I wouldn't worry about it. If seven years here couldn't get you to grow up, I doubt anything will." His voice was sarcastic, yet somehow without any real emotion.

\_Only Zeke,\_ Samuel thought, and then watched Jason roll his eyes. \_And only Jason.\_ He could still remember when he'd first met Jason. The guy was nothing but a joker. He was good in the cage, and he could drive with the best of them, but he was all-jokes, all the time. After seven years, he was still the "comic relief," if Spartans really had such a thing, but he was something more now. As he'd shown when Zulu Company had lost power and the Covenant were released, he was like the rest of them: an invaluable member who would risk his life for the group at a moment's notice.

"What do you think our chances are?" He asked suddenly. Samuel took a moment to find an answer.

"I think we've survived everything else." He said. "And we'll survive this too."

"There he is," the voice below him said cynically, "the incredible optimist." Samuel, even from directly above him, could almost see the smirk creeping across Ezekiel's face.

\* \* \*

>The Corporal walked quickly from the Recovery Building, toward the small structure the General made his office and home. He still wasn't entirely sure how he was going to get to speak privately with General Malone, or even what he was going to say, but he didn't care. The man had made an executive decision that was, in all likelihood, going to cost the Spartans their lives. <p>He reached the door to the General's "quarters," and knocked on the door. A moment later, he heard movement on the other side.<p>

The door opened, and the General stared at him from inside. "Let me \*\*guess\*\*," he said bitterly, "you want to discuss the Spartans?"

"Yes," the Corporal said, "I do."

The General looked around and stepped outside, closing the door behind him. He stepped closer until he was practically right on top of the Corporal, looking down at him from his six-foot two-inch frame. "And just what do you want to talk about, Corporal?"

Corporal Charles knew that, once a decision was made by the General, he had little to no say at all, even if he was supposed to be leading

the program. And, what was worse, Malone was all too aware of it as well.

"By moving the Spartans' Augmentation Schedule up, you're risking not just a few of them, but **\*\*all\*\*** of them." He said finally, putting everything out in the open.

The General's face became grim as he took a small step back, realizing that his intimidation tactics weren't working. "I did it because there was no other choice." He said.

Charles knew what he was talking about. When the Covenant had discovered Earth that morning, everything was put into overdrive, because, according to most, the end of the world was quickly approaching.

"You're risking the Spartans' lives." He said. "The Augmentation Department has made a lot of progress in the last few years, but there are still bugs left to work out."

"There will **\*\*always\*\*** be bugs, Corporal." The General said casually.

"Sir, they started new tests ten months ago, and they're scheduled to be finished in late November. With them, the success rates of the most dangerous procedure go up to 40-percent, and the Cybernetic Enhancement success rate goes up to 55-percent. The other two, with additional testing, are estimated to be in the low 70-percent range."

"I'm not giving them another month, Charles." General Malone answered. "That's **\*\*that\*\***."

Still, the Corporal persisted. He had to. "But sir, they won't have a chance without additional testing. Not only that, but the scientists weren't aware of how far you were bumping the schedule. The only way they can get the equipment up and running in two days is to abandon all the standard safety-checks on the systems, which increases the risks dramatically. Add that to the fact that their failure rates are already over 80-percent, and you could very easily be ordering the death of each and every Spartan."

Again, the General appeared completely unaffected. Charles realized finally how pointless the discussion was. The man simply didn't care.

"I've talked to the scientists," the Corporal said, "and if you bump the augmentation schedule up and try to do them in 48 hours, you're going to lose most, if not **\*\*all\*\***, of the Spartans. If you could only wait another month--"

Suddenly, the General just lost it. "We don't **\*\*have\*\*** another month, Corporal!" He yelled. "Didn't you get the memo? The Covenant have **\*\*found\*\*** us. Life as we know it is going to **\*\*end\*\*** if we don't get something together."

"But the chances of them sur--"

"They'll be fine." The General interrupted, raising his hand. Finally, the Corporal found himself losing control.

"Listen," he said, but the General smiled and raised his hand again.

"No," he said, "\*\*\*you\*\* listen. Would you like to know why you're in charge of this program, but the UNSC has sent me to monitor it? It's because, this way, you and the entire program answer to me." His face twisted with an arrogant smile that would've humbled Ezekiel Veron. "I'm acting for the good of mankind. You're acting on behalf of a group of nineteen soldiers who, by all rights, are barely human anymore."

"With all due respect, \*\*sir\*\*," Charles said, letting the word drip from his tongue as if it were detestable, "I've killed enough men and women over the course of this program. Unlike you, I'm not in a hurry to kill anymore."

The General's smile faded. "I don't want to hear another word, Corporal." He said. "If I do, not only will you be removed from your position, but I'll have you sent right up to the front lines with whatever remains of your Spartan 'squad.' Understand?"

The Corporal found he was out of options. Slowly, he nodded, defeated, and turned to walk away. What other choice was there? If he argued, he'd be tossed entirely.

"Don't worry," the General called after him, "in a few days, this'll all be over, and they won't be your responsibility anymore. They'll be under the care of the UNSC, and me."

\_\_\*\*That's\*\*\_\_ what I'm afraid of,\_\_ the Corporal thought, walking toward the barracks.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: Hey, I know that chapter wasn't nearly as good as the last one, but I promise you, next chapter is their second augmentations and the results. After that, I'm doing a small time-jump (just enough for them to be recovered from the procedures, you know...) to the moment you've all been waiting for:<strong>

\*\*The real fights with the Covenant begin. Armor, energy-shields, energy swords, rockets, lasers, rifles, and vehicles. I've got plans for Scarabs, the Flood (I've been asked once or twice about them), the even the Prophet. Just give me a little longer, and it won't disappoint.\*\*

\*\*As a final note, anyone who's been reading up to now, but hasn't reviewed, please leave me something. It doesn't have to be long or drawn out. Just give me some idea of who all's reading, and tell me something you liked or didn't like. I appreciate it. Thanks in advance.\*\*

## 17. Chapter 16: The Second Augmentations

\*\*Author's Notes: First of all, let me warn you that this chapter is WICKED short. HOWEVER, I only made it so because, to go on, I'd have to have a time-gap within the chapter, and I wasn't fond of the idea.

I don't know why. I just wasn't. That being said, I have the chapter after this one almost finished. It'll hopefully be up later tonight. If not, I promise to have it up within 24 hours.\*\*

\*\*However, this chapter will do a nice job of answering reviews while I've got the chance:\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: Yes, the Covenant are on their way. I said one or two chapters last time, but that's NOT counting this one, lol. This thing's really short, but it has necessary "setup" info. However, to answer your questions: There will be roughly half the Spartans remaining immediately following the second set of augmentations, but I won't give you the precise number just yet. And, in regards to the Chief, yes, I will be having him doing what he does best all throughout Halo 3: killing Covie-freakshows. However, while he'll be fighting on the Ark and in various other weird areas, Zulu Company will stay on and around Earth. That answer everything for you?\*\*

\*\*numaman: Thanks for the compliments, numa. I'm glad you liked that one...you heard what I said in Calc.\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey, glad to have you reading. I'll have the updates out just as soon as I can get them, promise.\*\*

\*\*1 way ticket: lol, I figured you wouldn't be too fond of him. Hopefully no one is...but you...I knew you'd hate his guts. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: Yeah...you need someone who's like that. I wanted him slightly different than Ackerson, but you just have to have someone who's a "good" guy who likes to hate my main characters. \*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Yeah...you've always had a knack for picking out the stuff that needs work. I agree with you. That conversation was difficult to work through, and it doesn't come quite as easy to me as some of the other scenes. Thanks though for the critique, man.\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Hello to my (is it safe to say "new?") reader! I promise you, I'll narrow the Spartans a lot more coming up, and you'll get the details of who's left. Trust me, once you have them, I don't think you'll have to worry about forgetting which is which. Thanks for reading though! I hope you'll stick around.\*\*

\*\*pottervspendragon: Another new person (at least, leaving comments)! My lucky day, I suppose. Thanks much for the compliment, and, with the Spartan Laser: AMEN!\*\*

\*\*Now, to the (short) Chapter 16:\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><p>

\*\*Chapter 16:\*\*

\*\* - The Second Augmentations - \*\*

**\*\*1500 Hours - October 22, 2552\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Recovery Building\*\***

"You'll be fine." Stephanie's nurse said the words like they weren't the same ones the Corporal had repeated six-thousand times in the past hour. Feeling more than a little uneasy, the female Spartan lied down on the hospital bed in front of her. She still couldn't believe that the day had arrived: after 48 hours of anxious waiting, the Spartans' second set of augmentations were underway.

\_It'll be done soon,\_ she thought, \_and then we take the fight to the Covenant\_. In truth, however, she wondered not only her chances, but the chances of the rest of the Spartans. Rumor had spread that the augmentation procedures weren't fully prepared, and that their success rates were terribly low. One success rate in particular was rumored to be less than one-in-ten.

Silently, she prayed that it wasn't hers.

"Do you have any questions before I put you out?" The nurse asked. Stephanie was puzzled. The Spartans were given no chance to ask questions during their first augmentations.

\_Probably a kind way of asking me for my last words,\_ she thought. But, against her judgment, she decided to take advantage of the opportunity.

"Just one," she said. "In my procedureâ€¦what's going to happen to me?"

The nurse smiled a little and sighed quietly. "You're under the program titled **\*\*Cybernetic Enhancement\*\***. From what I know, this means that, on your individual report, there's a list of body parts that will be genetically and mechanically altered. When the procedure is finished, the great majority of each of the parts operated on will be mechanical, and the only biological components that remain will be those that are used to connect your body to your heart and your brain." She paused for a second. "But I'm not the surgeon," she added, "I'm just the nurse."

Stephanie tried to picture herself as a cybernetic being, part mechanical, but found that the only image she could make in her mind was that of her older brother. Suddenly, she felt chills in her spine and was aware that she was starting to sweat. \_He'd be twenty seven now,\_ she thought, remembering that he would've turned twenty the year she was taken to the Zulu Training Ground.

All his life, her brother had been an athlete. When he turned eighteen, he became a soldier. He was in the best physical shape of any man she'd ever met.

That is, until roughly a year before Stephanie was abducted and made part of Zulu Company, when he was afflicted with a rare strain of viral infection that tore at his heart and lungs. The normally-active, incredibly strong man was crippled in days, unable to move for more than a few feet without stopping for breath, completely winded. He was taken to the hospital, and the doctors operated, removing every infected bit of him that they could, and

"fixing" the damaged organs and tissues with cybernetic implants.

Her brother survived for a few months, until, on a training mission for the UNSC, he was jogging to catch up with his team, and suddenly collapsed. No one was around, and his heart stopped beating only three minutes after the initial collapse. The autopsy revealed that the implants had suddenly ceased to function due to a "minor error" on the part of the surgeon.

"Dear God," she whispered almost silently as the nurse injected her with a sedative. As the drug took effect, she prayed again and again that she wouldn't have to relive what had happened.

\_Why this procedure? \_She wondered. \_Why me?\_

\* \* \*

><p><p>

"So, which procedure are they going to do?" Jason asked casually as the sedative was injected into his arm. A second later, he was already finding it harder to maintain consciousness.

"Yours is a pretty simple one, Jason." The nurse said. "At least, from what I can tell, it is. It's labeled **\*\*Defensive Implantation\*\***, which isn't supposed to involve any major genetic alteration."

Jason could already feel himself losing the fight with the sedative. He thought this one was surely more than twice as strong as the one that he'd been given during the first augmentations. "Meaningâ€|what?" He asked drowsily.

The nurse brought her hand under chin, thinking. In a moment, she had an answer for him. "You know the portable shields that Jackals carry?" She asked.

It took everything Jason had to nod his head without losing consciousness.

"Imagine yourself with two of them, but about six times stronger and twice as large." She paused before adding, "They'll be rechargeable too."

But Jason never heard her last statements, as he had already succumbed to the sedative.

\* \* \*

>Ezekiel followed the Corporal down the hall to his designated Recovery-space, passing room after room of unconscious Spartans along the way. <p><em>Typical,<em> he thought. \_Leave it to the 'V' in 'Veron' to alphabetically \_\_\*\*screw\*\*\_\_ me. Every time.\_

Suddenly, the Corporal stopped and motioned for Ezekiel to go into a room on the right side of the hallway.

"Sir," the Spartan said before entering, "do you know which procedure I'm scheduled to have performed?"

The Corporal nodded with a sad look on his face. It made Ezekiel very uncomfortable to see the man so stricken, particularly about a procedure about to be performed upon him.

"It's titled **\*\*DNA-Alteration\*\***, but it's also a neurological surgery." He said. "In essence, they're going to try a new surgery that will combine traits of your DNA with those of another organism. The neurological portion of the surgery will take place immediately after that, which will serve to genealogically modify your brain to register and account for the new DNA."

Zeke tried to grasp all the information he was being given but, even with years of training and a previous set of augmentations, he was completely lost.

"By performing both of these surgeries, the heads of the Augmentation Department are convinced that they can get you to exhibit traits of the other organism. In addition, by modifying your neurological connections to the rest of your body, they believe that they can control **\*\*which\*\*** traits."

Zeke was both cynical and very skeptical, if for no other reason than to avoid the fact that the surgery actually scared him. "Sounds like the making of a monster," he said.

The Corporal shook his head. "Don't worry." He said. "You're not going to grow extra body parts or lose any of your human traits. The main benefits behind this procedure that the scientists are looking to find are additional enhancements to your strength, agility, and, most of all, your reaction time."

Zeke nodded. He was still uneasy, but was gaining a slightly better outlook on the whole procedure.

"Look at this way," the Corporal said. "When this is over, you won't be just a Spartan fighting the Covenant. Instead, you'll be closer to a predator hunting its prey, and, in your case, that prey is the Covenant."

Suddenly, at those words, Ezekiel found himself liking the idea more and more. The mere thought of actually hunting Covenant soldiers like stupid, low-level animals was better than any he'd had in a long time.

"So," Corporal Charles said, motioning to Zeke's room, "time to go?"

"Damn right," he answered, and went inside.

\* \* \*

>"That's all of them." The General said as he watched the last of Spartans be sedated on a closed-circuit monitor. There were twenty such monitors in the office he was in, located in the center of the Recovery Building. Nineteen of them showed images of unconscious soldiers being operated on by almost fifty doctors, while one of them served as the video and audio feed from HIGHCOM Facility Bravo-6, the UNSC Headquarters in Sydney, Australia. <p>He looked up at the screen with the video feed, connecting him with a group of eight ONI (Office of Naval Intelligence) officers, all of them sitting around a table



in near pitch-black darkness. While he was horribly aware that they could see him perfectly, Malone couldn't make out a single face in the darkness.<p>

"Are you guys getting everything?" He asked.

"Yes." A man's voice answered coldly through the speakers, "excellent job, General."

The General couldn't speak for a moment, lost for words at the fact that he was speaking to someone from the Office of Naval Intelligence, the most secretive branch in the entire UNSC. He cleared his throat, "yeah, thanks." He managed.

Uneasy, Malone looked away, to the other monitors. On one, he watched as a table loaded with mechanical parts was wheeled into a male Spartan's room. On another, four surgeons surrounded a single female Spartan covered with a sheet as they performed some kind of brain surgery.

"So," he said tensely, looking up to meet eyes with the eight ONI officers in Australia, "what's next?"

\* \* \*

><p><p>

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Just in case any of you didn't read the above notes and are furious I posted a 1500-word chapter after a week, I would ask that you scroll to the top paragraph of my previous Author's Notes. Thanks all, and I promise to get you another (longer) one very soon. Later.\*\*

## 18. Chapter 17: Glitches & Instincts

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Well, here's the next one I promised. It's a little late, but...I kind of took a three-hour nap, and it put a little damper on my typing time. This one's about 5,000 words, so it should keep you guys busy for just a bit. I apologize if it's a little too "sci-fi" for anyone, but the idea came to me and I wanted to see if I could illustrate it very well. After this, next chapter will be a little in the cage (with their new augmentations), and then the remaining Spartans of Zulu Company will get their own, specifically-made sets of Mjolnir armor. The chapter after that, they'll be tending to the Covenant. Two weeks tops, folks, and I'll have it (probably sooner, now that college apps just ended).\*\*

**\*\*Now, for the few reviews I got on the last one:\*\***

**\*\*Lord of the Trees:** Thanks for the comment (like always), and I hope this one's long enough for you to enjoy!\*\*

**\*\*blackdeath0001:** Hey, thanks a lot for your compliments. Any inspiration I gave you, I'm glad to have had a part in! As soon as I get a break, I'm going to check out the story you mentioned to me. "Spartan II: Child's Play," right?\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey, adding you isn't a problem at all. The way I

see it, anyone who'll take the time to tell me they like/dislike the story, give me a reason or some critiquing, etc, deserves to be mentioned. If anyone takes the time to talk to me, I'll take the time to answer! And yes...I left you hanging just a little," lol, but here's the one I promised. Hope you like it.\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Glad you liked the short one from yesterday. Regarding your question: yes, the Spartans were exposed to different surgeries and augmentations and, because of that, they'll have different characteristics. However, multiple Spartans were exposed to the same procedure (there were only 4, total), so you'll have two of one, three of another, etc. You get the idea? Anyways, the Cage Match next chapter will make everything clear.\*\*

\*\*numaman: lol, thanks for the comment! Would you believe me if I told you I wanted to leave you hangin' a bit? Didn't want you to know what was being said in that conversation with ONI...they're terrible people, you know. ;)\*\*

\*\*Now, to Chapter 17:\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><p>

\*\*Chapter 17:\*\*

\*\* - Glitchesâ€|Instinctsâ€| - \*\*

\*\*1200 hours - November 16, 2552\*\*

\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Recovery Building\*\*

"It's good to have you back." Corporal Charles said, shaking hands with Blaine Everson as he emerged from the Recovery Building. Well, 'hand' wasn't quite the right word. This particular Spartan was almost exclusively mechanical from the abdomen up.

Very little surgery had been performed on his legs or waist. The only things that had been deemed necessary were small tweaks to the nerves to keep them reacting properly to the signals sent from his brain after they passed through his top half.

That was where Blaine was different. He and Stephanie had both survived the \*\*Cybernetic Enhancement\*\* procedure. Both of them, while 'human' at the skin-level, were much more beneath it. In both cases, their stomach, chest, back, neck, arms, and hands were biomechanical. The only 'human' parts left were vital organs, arteries and nerves going to the lower-body, and other small, necessary components.

Unfortunately, there had been some complications when he'd first awoken two days prior, in which the biomechanical connections between his brain and his cybernetic parts were malfunctioning. The twenty-two-year-old Spartan couldn't control his limbs. In addition, he suffered multiple-organ failure. Thankfully, the researchers caught the problem early and were able to fix the connections in time to save him from any permanent damage.

That being taken care of, both surgeries were huge successes. Each

Spartan's upper-body strength had increased substantially. Their upper-bodies would be able to connect directly to their new Mjolnir-style armor, once it was ready. The reaction time for their arms was almost immeasurable. In short, these two Spartans could go head-to-head with a Covenant Hunter and do a whole lot more than put up a decent fight. With the new strength they'd been given, scientists believed that they could overpower an Elite with only moderate effort, every time.

"It's nice to be back." Blaine answered calmly. He looked from side to side, squinting in the desert sunlight. "It's been a while since I've been out here."

The Corporal nodded. It had been almost a month since any of the Spartans had seen the light of day. Even as a hardened Marine, he contemplated whether or not he could ever do what they had. It took him only a second, and he decided that he could not.

\* \* \*

>"No side-effects, Samuel?" The nurse asked him as he sat down onto a hospital bed-table. The makeshift bed cracked and groaned under his immense weight. <p>"Not a one," he answered as he tested his limbs the same way he'd been doing for two days. He moved his arms and legs in circles, rotated them, stretched them, put stress on the bones, and made sudden, agitated movements in an effort to check for problems. Thankfully, there were no problems. His surgery had been flawless.<p>

As the **\*\*Increased Growth Stimulation\*\*** procedure called for, Samuel was injected with several powerful steroids and growth hormones, along with multiple protein and calcium supplements to keep his muscles and bones proportional to his size. In only a few weeks, Samuel became, literally, a monster of a Spartan, standing ten-feet tall and weighing several hundred pounds of pure muscle, with some of his bones as thick as small trees.

Magnus Daniels had undergone the same procedure, Samuel knew, and had responded to it even better than he had. Magnus now stood at a **\*\*towering\*\*** ten-feet, ten-inches tall and outweighed Samuel by nearly ninety-pounds. He was a giant even among giants.

In all reality, however, Samuel felt both of them had been very, very lucky to survive the process. Even with a supposed "high" success rate, two other Spartans had been subjected to the same procedure, and both of them had died during it. One Spartan's bones had grown at a rate that was too fast for the rest of his body to keep up with, and he essentially exploded from his skin. The other suffered cardiovascular problems that related somehow to the hormones.

Somehow, he and Magnus had managed to survive with no visible side-effects whatsoever.

"Alright," the nurse said. She'd been watching him and taking notes. "You're free to go, Samuel."

Samuel nodded in silence and stood up. Quickly, he walked out of the Recovery Building, stopping only for water from a wall-mounted fountain on the way.

\* \* \*

>"So, you're only half human now?" Blaine asked. Victoria looked at Zeke, then at another Spartan, Ryan, and then back at Blaine.  
<p>"We're a lot more than <strong>half</strong> human." She said coolly. The three of them had all undergone almost the exact same procedure: **\*\*DNA-Alteration\*\***. "There's a minimal amount of animal DNA within our own genetic codes. That incredibly small piece is enough to radically increase our reaction times and agility."

The other two nodded, but Blaine still appeared puzzled. "So, you're faster than the rest of us?"

Victoria smiled. "Blaine, I've been faster you for a long time." He smiled a bit, but when he didn't answer, she went on. "Look at it like this," she said, "the scientists combined cobra DNA with our own, and then they performed brain-surgery so that our minds will register the DNA that's there and use it to change our muscle tissue, our senses, and so on."

"Wait just a minute." Zeke said. Victoria turned to him, mildly irritated at having been interrupted.

"Yes?" She snapped.

"They gave you snake-DNA?"

"Yes."

Zeke shook his head. "I was told the DNA I was given was shark-DNA."

Now it was Victoria's turn to be confused. "That can't be right. You must've misunderstood."

"I **\*\*don't\*\*** 'misunderstand,' Victoria."

Ryan nodded as well. "We were both injected with shark-DNA," he said, "Great White, to be exact."

"Why the Hell would they inject you with shark-DNA and me with that of a snake?" She asked, shaking her head. "And that can't be right," she added, "because they specifically told me that the only DNA approved by Recovery Building's staff was cobra-DNA. The rest of them had been dismissed as being too risky."

As Ezekiel opened his mouth to speak again, Blaine suddenly fell forward, collapsing against the other Spartan.

"What the Hell?"

"Blaine!" Zeke said, "Everson! **\*\*Blaine\*\***!"

Victoria turned to call for a medic, but she saw a handful of Marines and doctors already sprinting from the Recovery Building. \_Must be his cybernetic parts again,\_ she thought.

Suddenly, the half-robotic Spartan started coughing as Ezekiel and Ryan ran to meet the doctors half-way. Victoria was right with them,

and could watch in horror as Blaine started coughing more and more violently, until blood was coming from his mouth.

A moment later, both Zeke and Ryan dropped their fellow Spartan onto the sand and clutched the sides of their heads. Ryan collapsed face-first onto the dirt and Ezekiel came down to one knee, still holding his head.

"Zeke! Ryan! What are you doing? What's wrong?"

Suddenly, Ryan sprang up from the ground, a different look on his face than Victoria had ever seen. He swung his head from side to side, looking first at the doctors, and then at Blaine, and then Zeke, and then to Victoria. She saw his eyes and was instantly frightened. They were different, furious, and primal.

\_What's happened to him?\_ She wondered, but no answer came in time to stop him from jumping one of the Marines. He sped toward the group in a blind madness and the Marine he darted to had just enough time to pull out his knife before being knocked several meters into the air and back onto the sand, where he stopped moving.

A moment later, Ryan stood up from a hunched crouch, his arm bleeding from a cut the knife had inflicted. He looked at the blood curiously.

\_What the \_\_\*\*Hell\*\*\_\_ is \_\_\*\*wrong\*\*\_\_ with you?\_ She thought again. Victoria moved slowly into a fighting-stance, prepared in case her seemingly-possessed Spartan teammate struck again.

He turned and looked at Blaine, still lying on the ground with blood all over him.

At that moment, Victoria realized what had happened. Ryan's surgery hadn't been a complete success. The doctors had either forgotten about or neglected to suppress the primal urge of a shark that smells blood.

Ryan seemed to make up his mind as he took a step toward the half-cybernetic Spartan on the ground. However, one step was all he got to take, as before his other foot could leave the ground, Ezekiel Veron had tackled him to the ground and was grappling with him for control.

Victoria could see the same empty, predatory look in Zeke's eyes that she'd found in Ryan's.

Making a snap-decision, Victoria elected to leave them to each other and help Blaine. She ran over, grabbed the now-unconscious Spartan, and hauled him over to the doctors. Four Marines grabbed him and started to run with him back to the Recovery Building with the doctors in tow.

\_\*\*Now,\*\*\_ she thought, looking back at the two super-animals fighting in the sand, \_how the \_\_\*\*Hell\*\*\_\_ do the deal with the two of you?\_

"Victoria!"

She turned toward the barracks.

"Victoria!"

It was Magnus. And he had Samuel too.

"Right here!" she said, turning back to the two Spartans that had taken defensive stances against one another.

Magnus rushed up beside her. "What are you two morons doing?" He asked. They both ignored him.

Victoria shook her head. "I'll explain later," she said, "but they're not in their heads right now." She pointed at the two blood-crazed Spartans. "Can the two of you restrain them?"

Magnus laughed coldly. "Been waiting to do this for a long time," he said with a smile, cracking his knuckles.

At that moment, Ryan's foot slipped slightly in the sand, and Zeke leapt forward with all the force of a small truck. Samuel moved just in time to grab the smaller Spartan and hold him in an arm-lock.

"Zeke, hold it!" He yelled. "Calm down!"

Just as Ezekiel's rage started to wane, Ryan took his own leap, but was caught in mid-air by Magnus' right hook. He hit the ground in a heap, and was pinned before he could even contemplate getting back up.

"Alright," Magnus said coolly to Victoria, "now go and get me a damned doctor."

\* \* \*

>"What the <strong>Hell<strong> is going on?" Corporal Charles yelled at the top of his lungs as he stormed into the Recovery Building. He'd just received word that two of his Spartans had, in essence, gone mad.

"Sir," one of the three scientists in the front of the room spoke up, "if you'll just listen, I'll explain what happened to-"

"One Spartan is in a hospital bed because of your faulty cybernetic implants, and two more are locked up in Covenant-style detainment cells because they saw blood and went for each other's throats! Am I warm yet?"

The man backed down sheepishly. "Yes sir." He said. "That's about right."

The Corporal nodded angrily. "Yeah, I thought it might be. Now, to my original question: what the **Hell** happened?"

"Well, as we said-"

"What went **wrong**?"

The scientist stuttered a bit at this question. "Well, **technically**, nothing went **wrong**, per se. It's more of a minor

setback."

Charles was mere inches from choking the man. "I'm not going to ask you again." He said coldly. "What the **Hell** did your **damn** scientists **do** to the Spartans?"

"Only what we were ordered to, sir." He answered. "Well, at least in regards to the two **DNA-Alteration** procedures. The cybernetic implants aren't working, but we've determined the problem. **Spartan 011: Blaine Everson** should be back up and stable in only a few hours."

"Okay," the Corporal said, trying to calm down. "Now tell me about the two that went nuts out there in the sand."

**Spartan 005: Ryan Matthews** and **Spartan 013: Ezekiel Veron** were given a different DNA sample than the one **Spartan 008** was."

"Victoria?" he asked, clarifying. The scientist nodded.

"Victoria Small, yes," he said. "In her test, we used cobra DNA. However, at the last minute, General Malone told us not to continue with that procedure and to use shark DNA. We had already performed the procedure on 008, but we were ordered not to use that DNA on the other Spartans."

Charles was stunned. "The **General** ordered you to use an **experimental** DNA combination on the Spartans that was deemed **hazardous** and **unable** to be used?"

"Yes sir. I have the conversation recorded in the main office."

Suddenly, the Corporal was once again ready to snap. "Anything **else** I should know about these surgeries? Any more **surprises**?"

"Just one," the scientist answered. "For all Spartans under the **DNA-Alteration** program, we were ordered to add an emergency set of instructions that dealt with their bone-structure."

"Meaning what?"

"Each of the three remaining Spartans has bones that are essentially shells. Inside those shells are rods that interconnect and hold the bone "shell" stable from the inside."

"What's the point of compromising bone-density? Now they won't even be able to support their own weight in the Mjolnir armor."

The scientist shook his head as an annoyed look overtook him.

**No**," he said, "that would be foolish. These rods give the bones better than **twice** their original durability and strength, but they weigh next to nothing. The entire point of this procedure was to **further** enhance their maneuverability and agility. When things are settled, these Spartans will be able to make completely vertical jumps of almost fifteen-feet."

Even in his current state, the Corporal couldn't help but be slightly

impressed with that bit of information. These Spartans, if they survived, would be able to run circles around the Covenant. Still, it was time for another talk with General Maloney—a very stern talk, no less.

\* \* \*

>"Blaine," a woman's voice called, "Blaine, are you awake?"  
<p>Slowly, he opened his eyes, breathing shallowly through the powerful sedatives gripping his body. "Yeah," he said quietly, almost in a whisper. He opened his eyes the rest of the way and saw Victoria sitting in a chair a few feet away, watching him. Magnus was standing beside her, emotionless.<p>

"You gave the doctors a real puzzle," the eleven-foot monster-man said, "or, that's what they were saying."

"Whatâ€¦what happened?" Blaine asked, coughing horribly as he tried to do so.

"Your cybernetic implants failed again." Victoria said bluntly. "The doctors sedated you and essentially re-worked your entire system. They still don't know if you'll recover or not, but your chances have improved quite a bit."

Blaine thought back to the moment when he'd collapsed, and suddenly remembered Ryan flipping out. "What theâ€¦what was wrong with Ryan?"

Victoria shook her head. "He and Zeke both are suffering from the ill-effects of their DNA transplants." She said. "Let me give you the condensed version: giving them the DNA of a creature who goes into a mad **rage** when it smells blood was **not** the best of ideas."

\_Shark DNA\_, Blaine thought. \_They smelled the blood when I started coughing, and they lost it.\_

"They're both in containment cells under the Sparring Cage right now." Magnus said, still not moving. "Word on the grounds is that the scientists can't "fix" what's wrong with them because it's an instinct. They don't know which parts of the brain to alter to cause it to disappear, and they're too frightened that they'll mess them up further."

"What happened when they lost it? I mean, what happened after I blacked out on the grounds?"

Magnus actually laughed slightly. "You went out, and Ryan took a step for you after knocking one of the Marines into next week. Unfortunately for Ryan, his arm was bleeding slightly from the knife the Marine pulled on him. Zeke went ballistic and tackled him." He looked down at Victoria. "She gave you to the doctors, and then Samuel and I tended to the two blood-crazed individuals."

Blaine nodded as his mind filled in the blanks. The last thing he could remember was Ryan going crazy and tackling a Marine in the crowd. After that, he was gone. "So, what's going to happen to the two of them?"



Both Spartans just shook their heads and shrugged.

\* \* \*

>The last conversation between Corporal Charles and the General was still fresh in his mind, letting the man's words echo through the Corporal's mind. He really didn't give one damn whether or not the Spartans lived or died. If Charles didn't know better, he'd have assumed the man actually <strong>wanted</strong> them dead.

\_It doesn't matter \_\_\*\*what\*\*\_\_ he wants,\_ he thought furiously, \_nothing gives him the right to order a change of procedures at the last possible moment and better than \_\_\*\*triple\*\*\_\_ the Spartans' odds of death. \_\_\*\*Nothing.\*\*\_\_

He walked up to the General's quarters just as he had done before but, this time, Malone opened the door right before he arrived, apparently just leaving.

"What is it **\*\*now\*\***, Corporal?" He asked bitterly.

Charles worked to bite his tongue. "Did you order the change in procedures for all Spartans undergoing **\*\*DNA-Alteration\*\***?"

Malone nodded. "Yes," he said, "I did." He added challengingly, "Is there a problem?"

The Corporal nodded. "The only DNA sample that was approved for testing was that of a cobra." He said. "Everything else we tried was deemed hazardous and unable to be used. Why would you order a last-minute change of schedule?"

"That's classified, Charles." He answered smugly.

**\*\*Classified\*\***?" he asked, letting the word drip from his tongue like a poison. "I'm **\*\*head\*\*** of Zulu Company. Nothing that relates to them is too classified to be told to me. And I **\*\*mean\*\*** **\*\*nothing\*\***."

The General rolled his eyes. "Actually, it's at **\*\*my\*\*** discretion that all details are provided, but, since you asked so **\*\*nicely\*\***, I'll give you the events in the nutshell."

"Sounds great," the Corporal said bitterly.

"All of my orders to change the procedures came directly from ONI and HIGHCOM, every last one of them. They're the ones calling the shots, not me. I'm just the humble messenger." He did a small mock-bow, smiling.

"HIGHCOM," Charles said, "and ONI are both monitoring this? For how long?"

"Since it started," Malone answered smugly. "What? You honestly think that the higher-ups would leave something of this magnitude to a low-ranking Marine without any real leadership background?"

The comment stung, but the Corporal worked to maintain his calm. "So," he said calmly, "HIGHCOM and the Office of Naval Intelligence gave you orders to switch the procedures on the

Spartans?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They feel that the Spartans' abilities haven't been sufficientlyâ€¦" he looked for the right word, "â€¦'\*\*tested'\*\* here at the Zulu Training Ground. That's why they decided to see if they're really becoming the "super-soldiers" that they're destined to be."

"So, \*\*naturally\*\*, to find out if they're \*\*real\*\* Spartans, the best idea is to expose them to a dangerous, life-threatening surgery they couldn't combat if they were \*\*gods\*\*." Charles said sarcastically.

"This is \*\*nothing\*\*, Corporal." Malone said.

"What do you mean?" He asked, puzzled.

"You remember when they had their first little run-in with the Covenant back in August?"

Charles nodded, still confused.

"What did your engineers say the odds of losing every generator at once were?"

"One in a million," he answered, starting to grasp the concept, and hating every second of it.

"Well, you're not \*\*that\*\* unlucky, my friend." Malone said with a smile. "ONI warned me three days in advance, and then cut the power to the facility that night. It was their first test to see if Zulu Company was really worth all the funding they were getting. Turns out, they are! Who'd have thought?"

Corporal Charles, for the first time in his life, had to restrain himself from assaulting his superior. "Four Marines were lost that night," he said, "four very, \*\*very\*\* good men."

The General shrugged. "Sacrifices must be made."

As a last-ditch effort to keep himself from losing it and playing right into Malone's hands, the Corporal changed the subject. "So, what will happen to Ryan and Ezekiel?" He asked. "How are we to deal with their newâ€¦instincts?"

"\*\*We\*\* aren't." Malone answered. "They'll learn to control the instinct on their own, or I'll have them decommissioned."

"What?" Charles actually yelled back. "You can't expect them to just 'control' a brand new instinct installed in them that they were never even meant to have!" He paused, recollecting himself. "What about an AI? If we give them an AI, couldn't we install it to help control brainwaves and suppress the part of their minds that's responsible for the instinctual behavior?"

"Well, in theory, yes."

"So, why don't we--"

"I'm not giving them an AI for that, Corporal."

"Why not?"

"Your Spartans are meant to be the very best. If they **\*\*are\*\***, they'll be able to control the instinct on their own. If **\*\*not\*\***, they'll be removed from the program. Either way, they'll get an AI with their Mjolnir armor, and not a **\*\*minute\*\*** sooner."

Charles was speechless. You **\*\*bastard,\*\*** he thought, what the **\*\*Hell\*\*** did they ever do to you?

"And, just as a heads-up for you and your 'super-soldiers,' I'm going to stop by both detainment cells at 2100 hours tonight and let a little blood spill. If they're not in control of their instincts by then, that's **\*\*it\*\***. They're **\*\*done\*\***."

"What?" He asked again. "Even if they could do it, you can't expect them to master such a task in only a few hours!"

**\*\*Yes\*\***, I **\*\*can\*\***, and I **\*\*do\*\***."

Corporal Charles looked the taller man straight in the eye. "Mark my words," he said, "at least **\*\*one\*\*** of them will be able to do it. And after they do, I'm going to make sure you never play with their lives again, even if it means contacting HIGHCOM myself."

He turned on his heel and began to walk away, fuming and using every ounce of willpower not to turn around and pull a gun on his superior officer.

"Oh, and Charles," the General called after him, ignoring his last statement completely. He turned to listen.

"Yes?"

"The same goes for the cyborg."

"What?"

"Everson," he said, "if the doctors can't give me an answer on his chances of recovery by tonight, he's out too. ONI doesn't want additional resources wasted on faulty **\*\*equipment\*\***."

Charles didn't say another word. He simply took off at a dead sprint for the Sparring Cage.

\* \* \*

>"Samuel, I **<strong>can't</strong>**." Zeke repeated bitterly for the third time. The older, now-enormous Spartan was standing outside Ezekiel's containment cell, which was made up of three concrete walls and a Covenant-style energy barrier on one side.

"You **\*\*have\*\*** to, Zeke." He said. "You have to get back in control."

"I **\*\*tried\*\*** to maintain control." Zeke said bitterly. "And I

couldn't do it. It's like there's another being in here," he pointed to his head, "and it won."

"It won **\*\*last\*\*** time. It doesn't have to win again."

"Hell, Samuel," Ezekiel said, waving his hand, "go bother Ryan." He motioned to the cell beside his, even though he couldn't see it.

"I would, but he's asleep. He's given up on controlling it, Zeke. All he wants is to have an AI installed to control it for him."

"Sounds like a winner to me." He answered cynically.

"Fine," Samuel said, pulling a knife from his pocket. "You forced me to do this, just so you know."

Zeke turned to look at the other Spartan, puzzled. "What are you doing?"

At that moment, Samuel took the knife and pulled it cleanly across the skin of his upper left arm. Dark, red blood rose to the surface, spreading around the wound and eventually dripping onto the ground.

"Damn it, Samuel!" He yelled, trying to cover his nose. If he smelled the blood, it was all over again.

"You have to learn, Zeke!"

Samuel started to say something else, but Ezekiel couldn't hear him. The smell was getting through. It tingled inside his nose, and he felt a sensation in his neck, and then his face and eyes as he slowly began to lose control.

He fell to his knees, clutching his head with both hands, trying desperately to hold on to whatever humanity he had left. Soon he was on his stomach, clutching it with one hand and stretching his arm out on the ground, clenching and unclenching his fist as he felt his mind going.

"Come on, Zeke!"

He heard Samuel, but he also heard something else. There was a terrible yell in the cell to his left, and he knew in the back of his mind that Ryan had awoken. Not only that, he'd already lost control.

**\*\*No,\*\*** he thought, **\_not\_** **\*\*me\*\*** — not **\*\*now!\*\*** He fought with the force working its way into his mind, his body, and his very being.

A moment later, he failed for a second time. He could see perfectly through his eyes, his vision sharper even than it had been, but that's all he could do. He could only watch in horror as his body leapt at the Covenant energy-field keeping him contained. He heard himself scream, but couldn't control it — couldn't stop it.

**\_Why God?\_** He asked himself. **\*\*Why?\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><p>

Samuel could tell immediately when Zeke finally lost control. His eyes shifted slightly, and the look of pain he'd had when the blood first came was lost in a black pool of rage. The animal in the cell then leapt straight for him, but bounced off the energy-field.

"Samuel, how is he?" A voice asked from his right. Samuel turned to see the Corporal coming down the hall.

"Not well," he answered. "He can't control it."

"Well, he needs to learn." Corporal Charles answered. "Apparently the General is stopping by in about two hours, and if he can't control it by then, he's likely going to be executed."

Samuel nearly fell backwards at the thought. "What? He can't expect that out of anyone, much less two people who just got out of a complicated neurological surgery." He said, and then added, "Sir."

"No," the Corporal said, "but he does. So both Ezekiel and Ryan need to get it together, **\*\*now\*\***."

Samuel turned back to the cell. He had covered the blood, and Ezekiel was starting to calm down. Ryan was still inches from foaming at the mouth.

"Zeke's closer to it than Ryan is, isn't he?" The Corporal asked.

"Yeah," Samuel said, glancing over, **\*\*much\*\***."

"How close is he?"

Once more, Samuel examined his friend, who was lying on the ground clenching and unclenching his fists once more. The older Spartan realized then that he was back to normal, but hated the fact that he couldn't overcome the instincts.

"Not close enough," he said, and then turned to the cell. "Ezekiel!"

The other Spartan looked up from the ground, which was quite a task, given Samuel's newfound height. **\*\*What\*\***?"

He pulled the knife out again, "time for round two."

\* \* \*

><em>Well,<em> Malone thought as he walked into the Recovery Building, \_time to see if I need to remove a few scientists from the payroll.\_

He asked an old man in a white jacket where Blaine Everson was being kept, and the man pointed him down the East-Hall. The General nodded with a smile and walked down until he found an open door at the end.

He looked inside, and saw the half-robotic Spartan, asleep on a hospital bed.

"Can I help you, General?" A nurse asked behind him.

"Yes. What's the Spartan's status? Is he stable?"

"Yes sir," she said happily, "he should make a full recovery in under three days."

"Well, thank you very much." He said, and she turned to walk away. Malone turned and walked out, toward the Sparring Cage. He couldn't believe that, in only three hours, those overpaid, under-worked doctors had actually determined Blaine Everson's problems and corrected them all. It was incredible what they could do with a little incentive.

One down, he thought as he walked down a set of stairs leading to the containment cells beneath the Sparring Cage. He saw the Corporal and another Spartan, a giant, talking to the two being locked up. And two to go.

The Spartan next to the Corporal looked up almost immediately, apparently hearing the General coming. He tapped Corporal Charles, who looked up as well.

"Evening, gentlemen," Malone said as he brushed past them. He turned to the first Spartan, \*\*Spartan 005: Ryan Matthews\*\*, and shook his head. The man was asleep on the ground. "Ryan Matthews, \*\*get up\*\*!" He yelled.

In a second, Ryan was at attention, looking at him calmly.

"At ease," Malone said, and the Spartan's hand came down. "Well Ryan, you're first."

Without another word, he pulled out a vial of blood he'd taken from the Recovery Building and poured it onto the floor.

Almost instantly, Ryan hit the floor, clutching his head as he had so many times already.

The General was about to say something, when he heard a second thud as Ezekiel hit the floor in the cell off to his right. "Oh," he said, "forgot, you guys smell it my bad." Malone worked to keep himself from laughing.

It took only a few seconds for the first Spartan to lose control. Evidently he's just not cut out for it, Malone thought, shaking his head. He turned away from the first failure and looked at Ezekiel, who was on his knees and shaking.

"What's wrong, son?" He asked with a false air of comfort. "You gonna make it over there?"

Ezekiel gasped and groaned, holding his head tighter and tighter, but, a second later, surprised the General, who was already sure of his failure.

"\*\*Yes\*\*," he said between gasps. "Yes sir, I \*\*am\*\*." Suddenly, the smirk he had always worn showed through the look of pain and agony in his eyes. A moment later, he stood up and came to attention, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

The General was amazed. He'd actually done it. "How did you do that?" He asked, dumbfounded. "How did you learn to control that instinct so quickly?"

Zeke Veron's arm fell, and he looked to the Corporal and Samuel. "Well, Samuel's lost a \*\*lot\*\* of blood in the last hour." He said.

Malone turned and saw more than a half-dozen cuts on the ten-foot-tall Spartan's arms, and there were spots of blood all over the sand-covered tunnel floor. The enormous Spartan smiled brightly, and the Corporal gave Malone a look as if to say "I told you so."

## 19. Chapter 18: The Perfect Soldiers

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Well, this is it. This is the very last chapter before they get their first taste of the "new" Covenant (meaning with Brutes and other things). In here, they get their MJOLNIR armor and have their last Cage Match. Also, there's a part in here that describes the armor of Ezekiel and Victoria. If anyone is puzzled by my description, please send me a message or something, and I'll try to explain. I tried to do it fairly well here, but if not, they'll be used a lot throughout the story, and I don't want anyone lost. So, just let me know.\*\*

**\*\*Now, as is typical, reviews:\*\***

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** Hey, long time no see! You were the first review on this one, and gave me some confidence that it was received a little better than I thought it would be. Thanks a lot, man[And yes, the General is not a nice person, nor will he have a particularly pleasant death\*\*

**\*\*Lord of the Trees:** Good, you hated the General too. Then my work is done, lol. Anyway, as you'll see in this one, Jason's fine, and his augmentations went very well too. As for whether or not these Spartans are "better," I wouldn't say that, but physically, yes. Mentally, they're about the same. Tactically...they haven't gotten a lot of experience with the Covenant yet, but they'll get better.\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey, thanks a lot for reviewing for me! I promise not to kill off any more than I have to...but I have the story planned out already, so I can't promise anything. If there is death, I promise it won't just be "random," it's part of my plot.\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Thanks for reviewing! Yeah, Zeke's still in it, and you'll get a full list of the remaining Spartans this time around. Ryan, yes, is toast (sorry to anyone who liked him...it's a tough life...). And yes, the General will die painfully, but not yet, as I still need him. Thanks again!\*\*

**\*\*Gormanuyai:** Hey, if a chapter is good enough for my toughest critic, it's good enough for me. Thanks man!\*\*

**\*\*The Hunted One:** I still the format of your reviews, lol.\*\*

**\*\*A, B, E:** YAY! \*\*

**\*\*C:** Zeke, through time and with the help of an AI (later) will pretty much get over that. The AI will serve to suppress most/all of the urges and reactions, and he'll be able to suppress it himself with time.\*\*

**\*\*D:** Blaine is okay. His cybernetic parts are now in working order, and you'll see a lot of him in this chapter. Thanks for reading!\*\*

**\*\*pottervspendragon:** Hey, I'm glad you like it!\*\*

**\*\*numaman:** Glad you liked this last one. I hope you like this one, leading up to the deployment of Zulu Covenant. Get ready Covenant; here they come!\*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** First of all, I'm happy to have a new reader and, I hope, a (continuing?) reviewer. I'm glad you like what you've read so far. I'm just getting ready to start the real deal. I apologize for the earlier chapters and the whole "not knowing who's who" problem, but I've got less now, and it's much better, I think.\*\*

**\*\*In addition,** thanks for the water/ice ideas from Ghosts of Onyx. I'm thinking of doing something with underwater areas sometime later, but, thankfully, I've got some time to think it over first.\*\*

**\*\*Finally,** in regards to your follow up: I too did some martial arts when I was younger, and I know some of the fights are a just a little far-fetched. The thing is, I'm sure you can understand, it gets boring to read (and write) about a jab and a block and a jab and a block, one by one. I try to keep it fairly realistic, but I also work to spice it up a bit. \*\*

**\*\*And also,** I agree with your last statement, about what kind of things I can do with Spartan vs...anything else-type combat. Trust me, the drooling is mutual. I'm gonna have some fun with this.\*\*

**\*\*Now,** to the chapter. It's not one of my favorites, but remember, it's the last lead-up to the big-time. Next time I post, Zulu Company will be pitted against not one, not two, but three Covenant landing parties. I hope you stick around!\*\*

**\*\***

**\* \* \***

**><strong>**

**\*\*Chapter 18:\*\***

**\*\* - The Perfect Soldiers - \*\***



**\*\*1400 hours - December 1, 2552\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Spartan Barracks\*\***

Jason sat on his bunk, watching the clock in the corner of the room intently. **\*\*Finally\*\***, after weeks of waiting, the nine Spartans who survived their second set of augmentations were getting their reward. After years of grueling training and **\*\*two\*\*** sets of life-threatening experiments, Zulu Company was being given their own, specially-tailored sets of MJOLNIR Armor.

"One more hour," he mumbled to himself as the hour-hand hit three o'clock. He looked around at the other eight Spartans in the room. Six of them were asleep, but Ezekiel and Victoria were sitting upright in their respective bunks. It seemed like, since their genetic-alterations, they hardly ever slept, especially Victoria.

Jason looked at his hands and arms. They looked almost exactly as they had before the augmentations, with one difference: there was a black, metallic circle on each of his forearms, about halfway to his elbow almost an inch in diameter. He'd already tested them in the Sparring Cage more than once. Each disc in his wrists emitted a circular shield similar to the ones the Covenant Jackals used, except that his were much larger, each one being four-feet in diameter when fully expanded.

Jason's legs were different too. His defensive implants were there to protect himself and his teammates in the event of a heavy Covenant attack, and the scientists made a last-minute decision to use cybernetic enhancement on both his legs. Their reasoning, he was told, was that, if he was ever on the receiving end of something heavy, like a Wraith's mortar-shot or a Fuel Rod Gun, his biomechanical legs would be able to hold up to the stress better than normal, "human" body parts could.

Thankfully, his augmentations hadn't had the same side-effects that Blaine's had. His legs worked fine, and they were stronger than they'd ever been.

He looked around again, examining his remaining teammates. Ezekiel and Victoria had said, and **\*\*proved\*\*** within the cage, that they were faster and more agile than ever before. They hadn't fought each other yet, though.

Samuel and Magnus, both asleep, no longer fit in their respective bunks. At ten-feet-tall and up, their legs alone took up better than three-quarters of their beds. They'd both amazed Jason in the cage as well. His first fight after recovery from the second augmentations had been with Magnus, and it was a blowout. His two shields had helped some, but Magnus' new strength didn't come with a learning curve of any kind. He'd simply picked Jason up by his wrists and flung him from one side of the cage to the other.

It made Jason shiver, thinking of what this **\*\*monster\*\*** would do to the Covenant if he ever got his enormous hands on them.

He glanced over, finding the two cyborgs, Blaine and Stephanie. Blaine had made a full recovery and his cybernetic parts hadn't had another problem since their last failure on the sixteenth of

November. On the contrary, he'd established that, while his legs didn't pack the power that Magnus' or Samuel's did, his biomechanical arms and chest could overpower either giant, given enough time. Initially, they were about the same strength, but the giants were purely human, and their muscles tired. Blaine's never did.

Stephanie was the same way. Her upper-body was mostly cybernetic, and her arms could take the same punishment Blaine's could. In her time at the training ground, she'd gone from a whiny, annoying girl, to becoming, physically, one of the strongest beings in the entire galaxy.

Finally, Jason looked at the last two Spartans: Christopher and Landon. Landon had shared Jason's exact augmentations: biomechanical legs and defensive implants in his arms. The one who stood out was Christopher.

Chris was originally scheduled for the same program that Magnus and Samuel had undergone, but, for some reason, had a violently allergic reaction to something in the hormone mixture. Because the scientists used different hormones and chemicals than they'd used in the first set of augmentations, it literally could've been **\*\*anything\*\***. For that reason, he was removed from that program and, essentially, was treated as a guinea pig for a variety of other procedures.

In the end, his legs and right arm were biomechanical; he had a defensive implant, just as Jason and Landon had, in his left arm, and the bone-structure of everything but his legs and right arm had been altered in the same way the DNA-altered Spartans had had done.

Somehow, in the course of all these procedures, he never once had a negative side-effect show itself. Plain and simple, it was a miracle.

\_Or the guy's just really, \_\_\*\*really\*\*\_\_ lucky,\_ Jason thought. He glanced at the clock again.

"Almost time," he said quietly. Ten more minutes until four o'clock.

At that moment, the intercom in the room clicked on. "All Spartans are to report to the Meeting Room at this time."

\_Hmmâ€|they're early,\_ Jason thought as he watched the rest of the Spartans stand up from their bunks. The ones who'd been asleep were instantly awake and alert, only blinking once or twice to completely regain their senses.

"It's about time." He said, getting up as well.

\* \* \*

>Stephanie walked into the Meeting Room and took her place in the line of Spartans standing only a few feet from the door. Corporal Charles was at a podium at the stage, with two Marines to either side of him.<p><p>

As soon as all the Spartans were inside, the Corporal started. "Alright," he said, moving closer to the podium. For a second,

Stephanie's thoughts wandered to the last time she'd found herself in this room. It was back in August, when the captured Covenant soldiers had escaped containment and ravaged Zulu Training Ground. As a handful of Spartans left for the Armory, the rest of them were stuck inside the Meeting Room while the aliens hammered the walls with Fuel Rod Guns.

Stephanie remembered thinking for a moment, very clearly, that their chances of survival, at that point, were slim to none.

But she'd been wrong. Somehow, their luck had bailed them out of the situation, and they'd escaped unharmed.

"Spartans," the Corporal said, and she came back to the moment. If there had been any points in the line of Spartans that were uneven before he spoke, they were instantly flattened out, and every Spartan stood at rigid attention. "At ease," he said casually.

Nine hands came down, each one faster than the Marines beside the Corporal could've even made out.

"Today," Corporal Charles continued, "you all will take the last major step in your training here at Zulu Training Ground before we turn you loose on those alien **\*\*bastards\*\*** hovering above us." The Corporal glanced around the line, a proud smile on his face. "Today, you'll be getting your armor."

\_Finally,\_ Stephanie thought, \_we did it. \_\_\*\*Finally\*\*\_\_, our training is about to make a difference in this war. \_She thought of her family, somewhere in Las Angeles, going through their lives without her. After more than seven years, the thought of a tear over her long-lost family never even crossed her mind. Instead, one thought expanded in her head: **\*\*finally\*\***, she had a chance to protect them.

"We'll be calling you up in sets." The Corporal said. "First up, Samuel and Magnus are getting their specially-made sets of MJOLNIR-armor."

Each of the two giants took a step forward, putting them a full meter in front of the rest of the line.

"Magnus and Samuel," he said, "your sets of armor are almost identical to the MJOLNIR VI-style that the Master Chief wears, except for a few key differences. The first is that, obviously, they're much larger and much heavier than the armor he wears, but the two of you shouldn't even notice the extra weight. Second, and more importantly, because your armor comes so large, we've installed additional shielding-systems. Your shields should hold up to roughly twice the punishment of other, normal MJOLNIR sets."

At that, two of the Marines beside the Corporal stepped forward and, without a word, escorted the two enormous soldiers out of the Meeting Room. A few moments after they'd gone, Corporal Charles started again.

"Next, Ezekiel and Victoria are up."

The two DNA-altered Spartans each stepped forward in total silence, their footsteps not making a sound, and their faces completely

emotionless.

"Your sets of armor are the polar opposites of Magnus and Samuel's. They're thinner, lighter, and more durable and are designed to allow you a much greater and less stressful range of motion." The Corporal's eyes darted back and forth between the two soldiers, an air of approval evident in his face. "In addition, each set has four offensive mounts on the armor, one on each elbow, and another on each knee."

At this, Stephanie was puzzled. She looked to the two Spartans standing out from the line to see if they perhaps understood, but the looks on their faces said very clearly that they had no more of an idea than she did.

"What I mean," the Corporal clarified, now starting to use his hands to talk, "is that, on each set, the segment of armor between your elbow and your shoulder will be directly connected to the segment on your wrist, and not to your shoulder, on the top side of your arms. The same applies to the piece between your knee and waist."

Still, Stephanie was completely lost. Victoria and Ezekiel still looked very puzzled as well.

"Never mind," the Corporal said, giving up, "you'll see for yourselves pretty soon."

With that, the other two Marines escorted Ezekiel and Victoria from the Meeting Room. As they exited the room, the first two Marines re-entered, walking up to the Corporal and standing beside him just as they had been earlier.

"Alright," Corporal Charles said, looking straight at Stephanie kindly, "Blaine and Stephanie are next."

She took a step forward and heard Blaine do the same.

"Because each of your upper-bodies is biomechanical, we can directly link the upper half of your MJOLNIR armor to you. Your lower halves will be purely MJOLNIR VI-style, and your tops will be as well, at least, for now."

Stephanie wondered a little what the scientists would change in their armor that would be affected by their direct link to her and Blaine's biomechanical bodies. In addition, she wondered if the alterations were ready yet. \*\*Surely\*\*, with better than seven years of training, the scientists had had time to perfect them.

\* \* \*

>Victoria looked curiously in the mirror on the wall. She and Ezekiel had both been taken to a small room within the main building and laid on separate operating tables. For a second, she wondered if more augmentations were on the way, but quickly remembered the little bit they'd been told about the MJOLNIR armor, and how it literally melded to the host's body.<p><p>

Now, after a full half-hour in the armor, she felt like she was a super-soldier three-times-over. First she'd been augmented and became a Spartan, with superhuman strength and speed. Next, she'd had her

genetic code altered, leaving her strength and most parts of her unchanged, but dramatically, **\*\*radically\*\*** improving her speed, agility, reaction time, and senses of smell and sight.

And now, if it were possible, she felt even greater than a Spartan. Her shining, indigo-colored armor was next to weightless and melded perfectly to every contour of her body. And, finally, she understood what the Corporal had been talking about when he told her and Ezekiel about the "offensive mounts" on the armor.

The armor on her arms fit like the perfect glove on all sides from her fingertips to her elbows. Above that, the sides and bottom of the armor on her upper-arm were all one interconnected piece, but the top-side of the armor connected in only one place: to the top-side of the armor on her forearm. In addition, that one segment was thin and sharpened, ending in a razor-sharp point up at her shoulder.

If she bent her arm, the 'blade' was always connected to her forearm and, because of the way it was connected, the sharpest point was always at the end of a line, straight from her hand, all the way back. For instance, if she held her arms out, palms up, the 'blade' segment would appear identical to the rest of the armor, and it would be on the underside of her arms. In the same instance, if she bent her arms and put her palms toward her face, the 'blades' would be pointing straight down to the ground.

She glanced down, looking at her armored legs. The MJOLNIR armor covering them was made in the same fashion. If she bent one of her legs, the 'blade' segment would come forward slightly, still pointing up. They were attached to the armor on her lower-leg, and worked almost identically to the ones on her arms.

Finally, there were four inch-long, curved spikes on the top-side of each of her forearms. They came straight up, and then curved toward her fist. When she'd asked what they were for, because they weren't really long enough to be used as a weapon, the scientists had told her that they were installed with the idea of using them to parry sharp Brute-style weapons or Energy Swords.

\_But,\_ she thought, admiring them,\_ I bet they'd slit a Covenant throat pretty well in a pinch too.\_

As if adding these dangerous weapons to her arsenal wasn't enough, the armor had an unbelievable effect on her already-incredible speed and agility. She'd been instructed, after the armor was put on, to simply think of moving her arm slowly to her chest, as the original Spartans had supposedly been instructed as well. The moment her mind even considered moving her arm, it was there, at her chest, at lightning speed. At first, her movements were awkward and exaggerated, but after just a few minutes, she accepted the learning curve and adapted very quickly.

Within ten minutes, she was walking around the room, and then running and jumping. She was punching the air, spinning and making mock-dodges like she would in the Sparring Cage. Her jabs and hooks were fast enough that a normal human being would've never even seen them coming. Also, with this speed came newfound strength as well. A single punch from her would be enough to shatter a human being's skeletal structure everywhere **\*\*close\*\*** to where they were hit. If she hit hard enough, she had no doubt that she could blast someone's

bones right out the back of their body, dislodging them from every bone nearby and sending them tearing through the skin.

The last thing that seemed strange to her was the helmet that the scientists had put on her. It was standard MJOLNIR VI, except the visor was thinner and the helmet was lighter. The moment the helmet was attached to the rest of her armor, it connected to the neuro-chip in her head, and she could see readouts of her current health, heart-rate, armor-status, and a targeting reticule appeared in the center of her vision.

She looked around with this new view of the world, and quickly realized that her teammates showed on the visor with their identification numbers and their names. However, only Spartans that had their armor on already showed, including Magnus, Samuel, and Ezekiel. The scientists told her that, simply by focusing on a fellow Spartan, she could create a secure line with which to communicate with them. It was incredible.

This was what it meant to be a Spartan. She, and the rest of Zulu Company, were the **\*\*perfect\*\*** soldiers.

Suddenly, Ezekiel turned toward her from the far side of the room. The pitch-black-armored Spartan didn't move, but his voice sounded in her ears.

"So, Victoria, you know what this means?" He said with a hint of arrogance.

She smiled to herself, bringing her arm up and clenching and unclenching her fist casually, admiring the efficiency, and the look, of her new armor. "It means, **\*\*next\*\*** time we're in the cage, I'm kicking your ass in **\*\*style\*\***."

\* \* \*

>"This is incredible." Blaine's voice echoed in Jason's ears. It was like the other Spartan was right beside him, but in reality, he was more than thirty-feet away. Jason agreed entirely. It was hard to believe that, when the Spartans believed that they'd been so efficient, there was an entirely new level to be had, and it existed in the form of their MJOLNIR armor.<p><p>

"Damn right," he said, knowing without a doubt that Blaine and Blaine alone would hear him, with 100-percent clarity. Their new armor allowed their voices to travel over secure channels with absolute ease.

Jason looked straight down at his biomechanical legs. They were covered in a dark, gold-colored metal that was his armor. This part of his armor set: the lower body, was connected directly to mechanical ports on his legs and waist, and radically increased the strength in his legs.

The other half was identical to the set the Master Chief wore: standard MJOLNIR VI shielded armor. Even so, it was more than enough to fundamentally alter the way he moved his limbs. All he did was think to move, and it was done, faster than he could've even registered were he not already augmented.

And, from what Blaine had told him, he and Stephanie had been altered in about the same way, albeit in a reversed fashion. Instead of their legs being directly connected, their upper-bodies were, and their legs were covered in standard MJOLNIR VI-style armor.

"So," a Marine in the corner said, glancing around at each of the Spartans, "you guys ready to take these babies for a spin?"

\_Oh \_\_\*\*yeah,\*\*\_ Jason thought, \_sparring time.\_

\* \* \*

> <p>"Teams will be as follows," the Corporal said as the Spartans lined up outside the cage. "On one side will be Victoria, Blaine, and Magnus."<p>

Magnus smiled to himself and held his arms out in front of him. His armor was colored dark red, almost brown, and was several inches thick in some places. Because of that, it weighed multiple tons, but the Spartan-behemoth, as promised, barely noticed. His body moved with speed and efficiency he'd never even \*\*dreamed\*\* possible.

"On the other side, I'm putting in Samuel, Ezekiel and Jason. Your shields are turned off for this one, because they were triple-checked before ever putting the suits on you. This time around, you're fighting just to test out your new capabilities." He paused and pointed at the two DNA-altered Spartans. "And you two," he said, smiling, "I know that you've got spikes capable of \*\*impaling\*\* your fellow Spartans, but I'd \*\*really\*\* rather you didn't; got it?"

Both Spartans nodded.

Magnus looked around, first at his team, and then at the other. Victoria's armor was a dark color, probably indigo, but Blaine's was different. His was almost white, with red on the shoulders and atop the helmet. Magnus thought it was a stupid move; it would make him like a walking target.

On the other side, Samuel's armor was dark brown, like the dirt down below the Sparring Cage. Jason's was dark-gold in color, with a few hints of blue on the legs. Ezekiel was clad in black, with small streaks of yellow on the shoulders, but nothing else.

\_Again,\_ Magnus thought, \_a brilliant idea to draw attention to themselves.\_

A second later, he followed Blaine into the cage, with Victoria behind him. The other team walked inside after her, seeming not the least bit concerned about the battle that was about to take place.

"Okay!" the Corporal yelled, "Go!"

"Time to go," Magnus said quietly, focusing on his two teammates. Two green acknowledgement lights blinked in the corner of his helmet.

"I'll take Jason." Victoria's voice echoed in his ears.

"The big one's mine." Blaine said immediately after, clearly

referring to Samuel, who towered several feet over his two teammates.

"\*\*Perfect\*\*," Magnus said smugly without a hint of sarcasm, "I've got Veron."

\* \* \*

>Jason tested the shields on his arms twice when he saw Victoria start to move in his direction. "I think they've picked their targets." He said into his helmet, focusing vaguely on his teammates.<p><p>

"I've got no problem with that." Zeke's voice sounded. He'd obviously noticed that Magnus was walking right toward him.

\_Of \_\_\*\*course\*\*\_\_ he has no problem with it,\_ Jason thought, \_he just \_\_\*\*loves\*\*\_\_ fighting monster-man over there.\_ On the other hand, Jason was stuck with Victoria, who he knew to be faster than any Spartan but Zeke and, personally, he believed she could take him too, when they finally got to fight.

"What about you, Samuel?" He asked. "Think you can handle our friend the wind-up toy?"

Samuel laughed slightly. "Yeah," he said, "I'm up for a challenge."

Jason nodded, knowing that his agreement alone would cause a green light to blink in the corner of Samuel's heads-up-display (HUD). He turned to watch Victoria as she came closer, walking slowly for how fast she could move.

\_Come on, \_he thought, \_bring it.\_

She got closer, until she was less than ten yards from him, and suddenly broke into a dead sprint. Instantly, Jason twisted and brought his right arm up to block, activating the shield on his arm as well.

The blue, circular shield appeared instantly, taking the brunt force of dozens of jabs and kicks from Victoria. Jason pressed his cybernetic legs hard into the ground, cracking the concrete beneath him, but allowing him to hold his ground.

As she continued to let loose on the shield, he couldn't help but be stunned at how fast she'd covered the distance between them. Sure, it was only ten yards, but she'd covered it with such speed that even his augmented eyes barely caught her motions. In only a fraction of a second, she'd gone from a crawl to being right on him.

Suddenly, his giant shield pulsed and went from blue to purple. A second later, it turned red, and he knew that its charge was nearly done. He'd have to turn it off and use the other shield for a few minutes, before that one would be ready again.

Unfortunately, Victoria didn't intend on giving him any spare time. She was letting a continuous barrage of punches and kicks into his shield, and if he took so much as a half a second to take it down, he'd be pummeled. What was worse, Victoria showed **\*\*no\*\*** signs



whatsoever of tiring or slowing down.

"What's wrong, Jason?" A female voice sounded in his helmet. "I hope you're not tired already."

Irritated, he thought about cutting off the communication channel between Victoria and himself, and she was silent.

\_Stupid, \_he thought, watching his shield become a deeper and deeper shade of red. \_She just keeps on striking, again and again and again--

Suddenly, he got an idea. He didn't know if he'd be fast enough to pull it off, but it was worth a shot.

He waited for a full two seconds, and her left foot came up to strike. At that moment, he sent the shield on his right arm forward with all he could muster. Her leg connected with the shield and she started to tip backwards.

"Got you now," he mumbled, taking the shield down instantly and bringing his right knee up as he lunged forward. His powerful, biomechanical knee caught her in the abdomen, and she started to double over.

Before she could even breathe, he used the mechanically-enhanced speed in his legs to step forward and put his right leg out behind her. A split second later, he spun to the right, sweeping her legs out from under her.

He lifted his leg up and was about to send it crashing down on her stomach, but Victoria's enhancements proved even more effective than Jason had originally thought. Even with the enhanced speed of his legs, the female Spartan had landed on her hands and did a back-flip, dodging before he could even bring his foot halfway down to her. Jason was left standing mesmerized by her literally-**\*\*insane\*\*** speed, with his gold-armored foot stuck several inches in the concrete.

A second later, she came down from her back-flip, which had propelled her more than six feet in the air, landing on her feet and in a fighting-stance.

"Shit," he said to himself, and brought up the shield on his left arm.

\* \* \*

>Blaine picked himself up angrily, bending the bars on the side of the cage as he pushed himself off of them. He was just as strong as Samuel was, but the brown-clad Spartan was <strong>huge<strong>! When he'd tried to push the behemoth, Samuel had locked hands with him, picked him clear up off the ground, and thrown him to the side of the cage, more than twenty feet away.

\_Well, this \_\_**\*\*sucks,\*\***\_\_ he thought. \_What the \_\_**\*\*Hell\*\***\_\_ do I do now?\_

Blaine watched Samuel carefully, noticing something he hadn't seen before. The other Spartan's arms were bending inwards, toward him. Either that was normal, or it meant that Samuel's arms were getting a

nice workout from this.

\_And, no matter how big or strong you are,\_ Blaine thought with a smile, \_if you work your muscles long enough, they'll tire like \_\_\*\*anyone \_\_\*\*else's.\*\*\_ He realized that, while he was in some slight pain from being tossed like Frisbee, his biomechanical parts weren't tired in the least. Honestly, if the readouts on his HUD didn't tell him what his biomechanical-status was, he'd probably never know until his parts failed.

"I was hoping for a challenge, Blaine." Samuel's voice came over the speakers in his helmet.

"And you'll get one." He answered, and charged the giant. He thrust his right fist forward and, as he'd expected, Samuel moved slightly and caught him by the wrist. Before the monster of a Spartan could grab his other arm, however, Blaine gripped the upper half of Samuel's left arm, gripping tightly so that he couldn't be pried off.

"You know you're about to leave, right?" Samuel joked, apparently about to toss him again. Blaine smiled.

"That's what you think."

He felt the stress on his body increase as Samuel tried to throw him by his right arm, into the back of the cage, but failed miserably. Blaine only gripped the giant's left arm tighter, refusing to give in. Samuel spun a full circle and let go, and Blaine let go of the other Spartan's arm and went soaring toward the side of the cage.

He was ready this time, however, and caught his balance in the air. Blaine put his hands out, catching two bars on the side of the cage and dropping his feet to the ground with a dull thud. He looked back at Samuel, who looked more than just a little winded.

\_\*\*Got you,\*\*\_ he thought, \_you're a freakin' \_\_\*\*monster\*\*\_\_, but you're only \_\_\*\*human.\*\*\_

\* \* \*

> <p>"Hey Magnus," Ezekiel's arrogant tone rang in his helmet. Magnus launched another hard right hook, but the smaller Spartan dodged it almost effortlessly. "You're <strong>way<strong> too slow."

Magnus could hear him start to laugh over the connection. He punched again but, as before, Zeke's reaction time was too fast, and he could hardly touch him. It was a no-win-situation for Magnus. If he used jabs and short kicks, he could catch the other Spartan, but not do enough damage to make any real difference. He was certain it hurt Ezekiel, but not enough to matter in the long run.

On the other hand, if he readied himself enough to do some real damage, the smaller Spartan would be moved out of the way before Magnus could come close to touching him.

"Damn you, Zeke." He growled quietly to himself.

"What was that?" The voice sounded in his ears again.

Magnus focused on the connection, terminating it for the time being. In truth, his hatred for Ezekiel had been toned down into more of a bitter rivalry than anything. He certainly didn't hate the other Spartan—Ezekiel just wasn't the most fun to spar with, **\*\*especially\*\*** when he was winning.

Magnus threw another punch to the black-armored Spartan's stomach, but Zeke brought his fist up to his chin, extending the 'blade' on his arm almost straight down. Magnus' fist crashed into it, and he felt the pain begin radiating to his wrist. The shot was enough to knock the other Spartan off-balance, however.

As the pain started to quickly subside, Magnus sent another punch Ezekiel's way, hitting the recoiling Spartan right in the face and getting him more than eight feet of airtime before he landed on the concrete.

There wasn't time for rejoicing, unfortunately, as Zeke just put his hands behind his head on the ground and flipped backwards, landing solidly on his feet.

"Nice punch, Magnus." His voice echoed in Magnus' helm.

"More where that came from," he mumbled, cursing himself for not focusing on keeping the connection terminated.

That second, Ezekiel charged him and was within a mere two feet of him before Magnus could even react. Doing the only thing he could think of, he lunged forward, attempting to grab the smaller Spartan...

And he missed. His arms were left dangling in the air as Ezekiel Veron's legs pushed off the ground, and he jumped clean over Magnus, all twelve-feet of him. He turned around in time to watch the other Spartan do a 180-degree turn, flip once in the air, and then calmly on his feet, facing Magnus from twenty feet away.

"What?" He asked himself, stunned. "What—what the **\*\*Hell\*\*** was that?"

Zeke's laughter echoed in his ears again. "What's **\*\*wrong\*\***, Magnus? Having trouble keeping up?"

\_That's \_\_**\*\*it! \*\***\_Magnus thought, \_this is \_\_**\*\*hopeless. \*\***\_He focused on Victoria, thirty feet away from him, on the opposite side of the cage.

"Victoria, can you hear me?"

A second passed, then two, then three.

"Yeah," she answered, sounding annoyed. He turned to see that she was unleashing an insane number of punches and kicks against Jason's shield.

"Umm, well—" Magnus didn't know how to say it. For a second he wondered if he should even be **\*\*asking\*\*** for help. He'd never had to do it before, and **\*\*certainly\*\*** not against Ezekiel.

"What **\*\*is\*\*** it, Magnus?" She asked, still annoyed.

"I need you to switch me."

There was silence for a few seconds.

"What?" She asked finally, starting to laugh, but not letting up on her punches. She sighed, "What's wrong? Is his **\*\*Royal\*\*** **\*\*Arrogance\*\*** too fast for you?"

"Plain and simple, **\*\*yes\*\***," he said bitterly, "I can catch him, but I can't take any time to put any real force into any of my shots and actually damage the little-"

"Well, I'd **\*\*love\*\*** to switch you. Jason's a little slow too." He saw her stop punching and take a few steps away from the other Spartan.

"What are you waiting for?" Zeke's voice sounded suddenly. Magnus had forgotten that he could still communicate with him.

"Give it about twenty more seconds, and then switch me." Magnus said over the secure channel to his teammate. A green acknowledgement light blinked once.

"Well," Zeke said, "if you won't make a move, I will."

A second later, he was charging again. Magnus waited for him to be close, and threw a solid right jab right to the smaller Spartan's jaw. But, just before it connected, Ezekiel turned around and fell on his hands, putting both his feet up and kicking the larger Spartan in his stomach.

Through blurred vision, Magnus watched him flip forward on his hands, doing another 180 in the air. He landed lightly on his feet, facing Magnus once again.

"What do you say?" He asked. "You wanna call it a day?"

"Not a **\*\*chance\*\***," he growled. But, before he could stand, Victoria landed directly in front of him with her back to him.

"Oh, come **\*\*on\*\***." Zeke said. "You went and got help, you big **\*\*girl\*\***."

\* \* \*

>"We're switching opponents." Victoria said, her voice ringing clearly in Zeke's ears. "Magnus is going to go play with Jason for a while."<p><p>

Zeke nodded, rolling his eyes. "Tell Goliath over there that he's nothing but an overly-large baby." He pointed to Magnus as the enormous Spartan quickly closed the gap between himself and Jason.

"First, you have to actually **\*\*beat\*\*** me." She said. "And **\*\*then\*\***, **\*\*maybe\*\*** I'll tell him."

Ezekiel scoffed. "It's not worth the trouble. I'd just as soon tell him myself."

"Well, I just thought I'd give you some incentive." Her voice echoed in his ears. "You're going to have to fight me, regardless."

Without another word, she closed the ten-foot gap between them and began launching punches and kicks that Zeke could only just barely keep up with. He blocked them, one by one, and felt the solid hits against his arms and legs.

Suddenly, she threw another punch at his face, and he saw his opening. He put his right hand up and caught her fist in it. She pulled for a fraction of second, and then resorted to pulling her right fist in, toward her chin, and swinging the blade mounted to her left arm toward his neck.

"Hey!" He yelled, twisting his left arm and catching the blade in one of the short "spikes" on his forearm. He knew she couldn't see beyond his visor, but couldn't help but glare at her anyway. "You could've **\*\*killed\*\*** me!"

She pulled her arms back quickly and shrugged casually before getting back into her usual fighting stance.

Zeke shook his head, defeated. "You're evil. You know that?"

\* \* \*

>Jason smiled to himself and took a step back as Magnus pulled his fist back in pain from striking his energy-shield once again. He punched hard, with each shot being strong enough to rattle the shield, but he couldn't punch as fast as Victoria could, and each punch was taking its toll on his hand.<p><p>

"Man, I just can't catch a break today." He said over the intercom. Jason laughed.

"Zeke run you around did he?"

He watched the enormous Spartan nod, saying nothing.

Jason waited for several seconds to Magnus to make a move, but he never did. Suddenly, he was puzzled.

"You okay?" He asked.

No answer.

**\*\*Hey\*\*!**

SLAM!

Jason felt like someone had just hit him in the back with a truck as he flew face-first toward Magnus, who grabbed him in the air and tossed him into the side of the cage.

"What the **\*\*Hell\*\***-"

He looked back to see that Blaine had somehow escaped Samuel for a moment and no-doubt sucker-punched him in the back. The half-cybernetic Spartan was standing in silence, "cracking" his

biomechanical knuckles.

"Jason, I'm sorry." Samuel's voice echoed in his ear suddenly. "He got my legs and then just took off for you."

Jason stood up painfully. "Forget it," he said. "How about I take the tin-man for a while?"

"Sure."

Jason focused on Blaine, opening a communications channel. "Hey," he said, "we're switching opponents again. It's you and me this time around."

A green acknowledgement light winked in the corner of his HUD.

A moment later, Magnus started to walk away, toward Samuel. Jason turned to face Blaine, who was slowly coming closer.

He watched Blaine carefully, but suddenly instinct told him to turn, and he only just barely got around and put his shield up in time to avoid taking a shot to the face from Magnus' right hook. At that moment, Blaine too charged him, and he put his second shield up, again just barely dodging major bruises.

"What is this?" He yelled angrily, backing up slowly toward the side of the cage. Both of his shields went a deep purple, and then turned red. Still, the two Spartans hammered away at them, refusing to let up.

When he felt that the shields were on their last legs, Jason did the only thing he could think of and used all the force in his cybernetic legs to leap forward, into the two Spartans. They were both thrown backwards, and Blaine fell to the ground for a few seconds before getting up.

And then, before either Spartan could move, Samuel picked Blaine up from behind and literally **\*\*threw\*\*** him into Magnus, causing them to roll across the concrete for several meters before coming to a stop.

Jason took a step toward his two opponents, but completely lost his focus when Ezekiel suddenly came skidding across the concrete. He slid for more than ten feet, put his hands down behind him, flipped up to his feet, and then took off right back the way he'd came.

\* \* \*

><em>What in God's green Earth is going on?<em> Zeke wondered as he charged back toward Victoria. They'd been on even terms for a while, until she'd made some comment about showing how fast she "really" was. After that, she was out-maneuvering him at every turn. He couldn't lay a finger on her.

"Come on Zeke," she mocked, "you're getting slow on me."

"Quiet!" he snapped as he reached her. He threw a flurry of punches at her, but she didn't even bother to block them. She simply dodged shot after shot.

\_Come \_\_\*\*on,\*\*\_ he told himself, trying to calm down,\_ of  
\_\_\*\*course\*\*\_ you can't hit her. You're losing your mind. Just calm  
down, take your shots, and be watch your guard.\_

He forced himself to calm down and eventually had her blocking the  
shots again. Again and again, Zeke looked for an opening, but he  
never found one. Truth be told, she was faster than he was, and it  
showed.

Suddenly, as he waited for her to make a mistake, he himself made  
one, and let his guarding-arm drop for a split second. Unfortunately,  
that bit of time was all Victoria needed to plant her right foot hard  
into his chest-plate. He fell backwards, onto the concrete.

He flipped onto his stomach a fraction of a second before her boot  
came down, landing on the back of his neck instead of his  
throat.

"Well, game over Zeke." She said.

"Not quite," he growled through the immense pain crawling up and down  
his spine. He gritted his teeth, forcing his body to begin to do a  
front-flip and then using all his lower-body strength to smash his  
feet into her back. The shot didn't really hurt her, but it propelled  
her forward enough for him to start to stand back up.

Before he could, however, she was back again, and her foot caught his  
chin, toppling him over and sending a piercing shock through his  
body. A second later, she had her foot on his throat, and he found  
that he couldn't move.

"I win." She said.

\* \* \*

>Blaine struggled to bust through the shield on Jason's arm. After  
his fourth punch, the shield turned bright red.<p><p>

\_One more,\_ he thought, rearing back and launching the best shot he  
could. The shield collapsed when his fist made contact, and he kept  
going, hitting Jason in the chest and blasting him into the side of  
the cage, bending and even **\*\*snapping\*\*** a few bars.

The other Spartan started to get up, but stopped and slumped to the  
floor, raising his hand up in a gesture to say that he'd lost. They'd  
been ordered, before ever reaching the cage, to only fight until they  
hit a certain point, and not do anything that could potentially  
damage the armor, or each other.

Blaine turned to see Magnus trying to get Samuel into a headlock,  
working hard to keep the brown-clad Spartan from breaking free and  
tossing him. Suddenly, Samuel did exactly what Magnus had been trying  
to prevent. He broke from the lock and launched his elbow into the  
larger Spartan's gut. Magnus doubled over, and Samuel sent another  
elbow straight down on his back.

There was a horrible cracking sound as the very structure of the cage  
rattled and small fissures ripped the floor as the several-ton  
monster-Spartan smashed into the concrete base.

Blaine watched Samuel turn toward him and quickly glanced back to make sure that Jason was still down before trying to think of a way to take him down.

At that moment, a green light blinked in the corner of his HUD. As he tried to figure out why, Samuel suddenly yelled in pain and fell forward. The cage shook once more when he hit the ground and, when the dust cleared, Victoria was standing behind where he'd been.

Instantly, Blaine's instincts caused him to seek out Ezekiel. He glanced around until he saw the black-armored Spartan outside the cage, watching silently.

\* \* \*

>"It's over." Victoria's voice sounded proudly in Ezekiel's helmet. She obviously hadn't bothered to set up a secure channel, with the battle being over.<p><p>

\_I \_\_\*\*can't\*\*\_\_ believe it,\_ he thought bitterly, furious with himself, \_she \_\_\*\*beat\*\*\_\_ me, and not just by a little. She was in a league of her own. \_He looked down at his hands, clad in pitch-dark armor. Suddenly, he became even angrier with himself than he already was. \_She actually \_\_\*\*beat\*\*\_\_ me.\_

Ezekiel watched as his opponents helped Samuel and Jason up from the ground and they all walked out. It was just a training exercise, in truth, but it was something else as well. It was a test to see who was on topâ€|and it **wasn't** Zeke.

"It's not over." He said quietly to himself, and looked at Victoria. "For now, all our time goes to destroying the Covenant, but, when this war's over, we'll have a rematch." His fist clenched slightly as a female voice echoed inside his helmet.

"Count on it." She said.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: As I said, if the part about the "offensive mounts" confused anyone, or the curved blades on the forearms, please don't hesitate to let me know. It was a complicated concept to describe that sounded good in my head but I had a terrible time putting down on paper (or, rather, keyboard). Thanks for reading everyone, and I hope you'll take a minute to review before I start work on the next one. Later, all.<strong>

## 20. Chapter 19: The Landing Parties

**Author's Notes:** Well, I finally got this one up. I've done everything I can to make it interesting, and if it's a little hard to follow at times (it shouldn't be...I tried to keep it to where one event directly follows the next pretty clearly), it shouldn't be too bad. Anyways, before I go to the Reviews, I wanted to address the details on Ezekiel and Victoria's armor:

**Truthfully,** I still don't have a great way to explain this. The best thing I can think of to do so is to say that, on their arms, the



armor that covers them from the fingers to the elbows is all one interconnected piece ("fits like a glove"). Past that, if you hold your arm out with your palm facing the floor, the armor covering the underside of your arm, along with your bicep and tricep would all be one piece, directly connected to the one on the forearm.\*\*

\*\*Now, the top side of the upper-arm is where things change. If your palm is still facing the floor, there's a spot on the top of your arm directly between your bicep and tricep. This is the spot where the armor would be just one piece, connecting in only one place, right at your elbow-joint. This piece is thin and sharp, like a blade, and ends in a point right before hitting your shoulder. Because of the way it's connected, it won't always cover the upper arm. Instead, as your arm bends at the elbow, it will always act as an extension of sorts from your forearm, ending in a blade. Essentially, any blow you could strike with your elbow (such as thrusting it into someone behind your or slamming it down on someone who was bent over) is made into a brutal stab by the blade mounted there.\*\*

\*\*I hope this answers any questions. If not...please tell me, and I'll try again. Also, if any of my readers is confident he or she knows what I'm implying and would like to take a stab at answering it better than I have, by all means, go ahead. I'm doing the best I can but, as I said, it's a real pain to put into words.\*\*

\*\*Now, Reviews:\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: I'm glad you liked it. Also, any ideas you have, feel free to voice. I've got a "plot" lined up, but as long as your ideas don't kill my characters or nuke the planet...well, let me know. ;)\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: lol, glad you liked it. I like having you review too...you know, when college isn't consuming your whole life. And yes, the General will be in major pain before it's over.\*\*

\*\*numaman: Yeah...Blaine's armor...lol. Who could that POSSIBLY be? I'm glad you got the blade concept...I was afraid no one did.\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: Hey, I'm glad the last one was a big hit with you too. As for your question: No. No major characters died during the augmentation process. The nine that you've heard are still there are the last remaining Spartans of Zulu Company. The rest fell, but I didn't write about it 'cause I didn't want to bore you all with another funeral. lol. And, in regards to your question about one of them fighting the Chief: I'd say it'd be a toss-up. Physically, they've been surgically altered to be able to beat him 100 times out of 100...but, by experience...like I said, a toss up.\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: Yeah...the Cage has seen better days (like Chapter 3). Thanks for the compliment, and I hope you like this one. I promise, I get them out just as soon as I can.\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: Hey, thanks for the review. As for the Spartans' new abilities...you haven't seen anything yet. Also, I've been busy, but I just re-read your review, and I'll read/review your story as soon as I post this chapter.\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Hey, I'm glad you liked this, but I'm sorry you didn't entirely get the idea behind the armor. I tried to explain it, and I hope it makes some more sense...if not, don't hesitate to ask me. I'll e-mail you a picture if I have to, lol.\*\*

**\*\*Gormanuyai:** Yeah, Zeke got beat. It happens, I suppose, lol. As for the DNA...well, I needed two animals, and I thought it would be cool to use a shark. And besides, they didn't need to speed him up that much...he and Victoria are already setting records, lol. Although, I'm like 3 or 4 in a row that you liked...that's gotta be some kind of record.\*\*

**\*\*FlyingPlatypus7:** Well, first, thank you for reading and tell whatever friend suggested my story to you that I send my thanks. Also, in regards to your question: I have a single story arc worked out, with one rather long plot to it, lol. There will be lots of battles before it's over, but I do have the rest of it planned out. I'm hoping it'll be as good as it sounds in my head...Anyways, thank you for the compliments, and I hope you like this one.\*\*

**\*\*NOW, to the chapter! Chapter 19...Hope you're all ready for the Covenant.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 19:<strong>

**\*\* - The Landing Parties - \*\***

**\*\*1500 Hours - December 19, 2552\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Main Building\*\***

Jason walked in silence back to the Spartan Barracks from the mess hall. The clock was nearing one o'clock, but he didn't care. For so long, it seemed, the daily routine for Zulu Company was to get up, eat, spar, eat, shoot, eat, spar **\*\*again\*\***, and go back to bed.

In reality, their augmentations had only been done two months before, and they'd only had their MJOLNIR armor since the first of December. But, to nine of mankind's greatest warriors and best hopes against the Covenant, it often seemed like time wasn't passing at all. Jason, personally, felt that every second he spent **\*\*not\*\*** fighting the Covenant was a second wasted.

For over a month, large numbers of Covenant Assault Carriers and CCS (Covenant Capital Ship) Battlecruisers had been orbiting just outside of the MAC Guns' range, releasing smaller crafts filled with personnel to land on Earth. The smaller, Phantom-class dropships slipped right by the enormous MAC Guns and into the atmosphere. Because of this, Marines were on-call 24-hours-a-day, ready to respond to Covenant landing parties.

And yet, Jason thought, we still haven't gotten a chance to make a difference in any of this madness. We're supposed to be the most efficient warriors in history, the **\*\*greatest\*\***, and yet we're limited to this little base in the middle of the desert.

He reached the end of the hall and opened the door on his right, stepping into the room he'd awoken in so many years before, when he

first came to Zulu Training Ground. Inside, six other Spartans were sitting around, no doubt as bored and restless as he was. Sparring only worked for so long. Mere **\*\*hours\*\*** after the Spartans were given their armor, they'd reduced the Sparring Cage to nothing but scrap metal.

"What's goin' on?" Landon asked as Jason walked by. He shrugged and rolled his eyes half-heartedly, the signal for "bored, as always."

He glanced around. Samuel was asleep, lying across three beds because he was simply too large to fit in anything less. Christopher was as well, but in one bunk, at the far end of the room.

Ezekiel and Victoria were both upright in their bunks, staring into space. To Jason, it seemed that the two of them never slept anymore, especially Victoria. She got half the sleep he got, maybe, and still somehow functioned perfectly.

Magnus was standing with his back to a wall, arms crossed and waiting patiently for the day to move on.

"Attention," the speakers in the corners of the room suddenly came to life. Jason glanced at the clock on the wall. It wasn't even one o'clock. Sparring wasn't supposed to start for another two hours.

\_That's odd.\_

"Spartans," a human voice came from the speakers. Jason immediately recognized it as the Corporal's. "We've just gotten word that three Phantom-class dropships have entered the atmosphere and, we believe, are landing either in or around Phoenix. HIGHCOM has approved my request to send you out, but there's not much time."

Jason would've jumped right out of his armor, had it not been melded to his body. Finally, his chance at the Covenant was here.

"Spartans, this is the real deal. Like I said, there's not much time. If you want to go, you've got twenty-five minutes to suit up, get your asses to the Armory for weapons, and be on the next Pelican out. Now, **\*\*go\*\***."

The second the speakers shut off, the room was a blur as seven super-humans sped around, getting their helmets put on and double-checking their armor and shield-systems. Moments later, they were leaving and Jason passed both Blaine and Stephanie, rushing at full-speed into the Barracks.

\* \* \*

>"**<strong>Hell</strong>** yeah," Blaine said as he picked up an M41 Rocket Launcher, loaded it with two HEAT rockets, and strapped it to the magnetic clamps on his back. Samuel watched him smile wickedly at the weapon.

"Take these with you." Samuel said to him, handing him a rectangular box with two rockets inside. Extra ammo was something precious to any soldier, but even more so to snipers and heavy

weapons-specialists.

Blaine nodded, grabbed the box, and stuck it in a large bag he had in his hand.

Samuel turned around and looked for weapons of his own. He grabbed an M90 Shotgun from a rack and strapped it to his back. Because of his enormous size, however, he had two clamps on his armor, allowing him to snap a second weapon to his back.

\_Just in case,\_ he thought, gripping a Rocket Launcher identical to Blaine's and strapping it to the second set of clamps. The extra weight would be enough to slightly hinder even most other Spartans, but at over ten-feet-tall and weighing several tons, he'd never even know it was there.

Next, he moved over the boxes of grenades in the corner of the room. He grabbed two Frag-Grenades and two Plasma Grenades, placing them on magnetic 'holsters' on his thighs. Finally, he moved to the far end of the room, near the door, and lifted an Assault Rifle from its stand.

As he turned to leave for the garage, he heard Zeke whistle beside him. "That's a Hell of a weapon set," he said, snapping a full clip into the bottom of an SRS Sniper Rifle with a satisfying 'CLICK.'

Samuel eyed his teammate's own set. The smaller Spartan had three more clips held on his legs, an M6D Pistol on one thigh, and something Samuel couldn't see on the other. He squinted behind the visor of his helmet, trying to see what was being held there.

"What are you looking at?" Zeke asked, and then looked down to his thigh. Samuel heard him laugh coldly as he lifted the small handle from his armor. Just as Ezekiel lifted it up, Samuel recognized it for what it was: a hilt.

That second, two brilliant, blue-white blades of plasma erupted from the sides of the hilt as the Energy Sword activated. A split-second later, Samuel was staring at a weapon capable of cutting through even the most powerful armor or shielding like a hot knife through butter.

And, suddenly, the blade vanished, and Ezekiel fastened it back to his armor. "Victoria's got one too." He said. "Time to see which one of us is the better swordsman."

"That's swords\*\*woman\*\*." The female Spartan's voice suddenly echoed in both their helmets. Samuel could almost feel his teammate scowl at the sound of her voice. He hadn't been very happy since she beat him in the Cage, and showed no signs of letting it go anytime soon.

Without another word, Zeke turned and walked to the end of the room. Samuel checked his watch.

\_Twelve more minutes,\_ he thought. \_Our ride leaves this desert in twelve minutes.\_

And, at that, he turned and walked out as well, followed by three

other Spartans as they ran for the garage.

\* \* \*

>"How much longer?" Victoria asked as the Pelican continued to fly through the Arizona sky. She turned first to look at the monitor on screen, which showed the three Phantoms flying over the city of Phoenix, Arizona, and then away, out the open back of the Pelican, watching images on the ground pass by and fade away behind them.  
<p>"Those Phantoms have to land soon, I would think." Magnus said. He too glanced out of the open hangar, waiting anxiously.<p>

The Spartans had loaded up inside the Pelican and left Zulu Training Ground at 1320 hours, and it was now passed two o'clock. The nine of them took up the entire crew-space of the Pelican, and another one, full of Marines, was directly behind them.

And, to their surprise, somewhere behind that Pelican, was a green-colored Phantom belonging to the Elites.

Zulu Company had been well-informed that the Sangheili (a.k.a. Elites) had abandoned the Prophets and joined forces with the humans, but it had been almost impossible to believe before. Now, with an alien-piloted dropship following them to their destination, each one of them was more than a little uneasy about the new 'partnership,' but couldn't deny its existence.

"The Phantoms have stopped." The pilot's voice echoed over the intercom system. "Intelligence was right," he said, "they landed in a big, open area: a parking lot, right near the center of Phoenix. ETA: fourteen minutes."

"Got it," Magnus said, mostly to himself. He looked at the Shotgun in his hands for a time and felt adrenaline begin to pump. Effortlessly, almost subconsciously, he touched the Assault Rifle and Battle Rifle on the two magnetic clamps on his back. He touched the four grenades on his thighs.

It was time.

"ETA: two minutes."

\_This is itâ€|\_

\* \* \*

><p><p>

The Pelican slowed considerably as it approached the area where the three Covenant dropships had chosen to stop. Landon, like the rest of the Spartans, was watching the monitor on the wall opposite the back of the Pelican intently for some idea of what they were up against.

The image showed several Brutes, all of them low rank and with only minimal armor, except for one Chieftain-level alien, heavily armored and carrying a huge Gravity Hammer in his hands. In addition, dozens of Grunts and Jackals were running about, scattering from the Phantoms and yelling in their alien tongues.

"We're about to pass over the first drop-point." The pilot's voice echoed inside the Pelican. "Zeke, get ready to jump."

Without a single word, the DNA-altered Spartan stood from his seat on the right side of the plane and walked to the back, only a foot away from the open air outside. He gripped a handle on the side to avoid falling out of the dropship.

A few seconds later, as they passed over a large, three-story building, the pilot spoke again. "Alright, Zeke," he said, slowing the Pelican down slightly, "it's now or never."

Landon watched as his fellow Spartan jumped right out of the Pelican, landing effortlessly on the roof of the building they'd just flown over in without a sound, and then turned his head to look at the monitor on the wall.

The image of the Covenant landing party now showed the soldiers running around in haste, gathering their arms and shields. He could see several Grunts mounting portable Plasma Cannons, which were essentially turrets that fired superheated plasma with a rate of fire only slightly lower than that of a machinegun.

"Damn it," Landon mumbled, "they saw us."

"Well, so much for surprising them." Victoria said coolly.

A second later, the monitor was turned off as the pilot slowed the Pelican down and started flying very low to the ground. "Next set of Spartans," he yelled over the intercom with enthusiasm, "time to go!"

That was Landon's cue. Along with Jason, Blaine, Stephanie, Christopher and Victoria, he jumped straight out of the moving dropship, landing solid on his biomechanical legs on the ground with a dull thud.

Before he could even start to make a move, a deep, male voice echoed in the headset of every Spartan. "Spartans," the voice called.

Landon heard Blaine answer "yes" for all of them.

"Here's your ride."

At that moment, the second Pelican that had been flying behind them flew directly overhead, dropping a Warthog LRV (Light Reconnaissance Vehicle) barely ten meters left of them.

"The word on the comm-channel is that a few of those Covie bastards got scared and took their Ghosts for a joyride in town." The man said. "Your Corporal tells me that a few of you should be able to make short work of 'em."

Landon smiled. This was his specialty.

"You heard right," he said. "We've got it from here."

\* \* \*

>"They're really putting their defenses together." Blaine said, watching a dozen Grunts setting up Plasma Cannons. He focused on Ezekiel for a communication line. "How's your position?" <p>A moment passed before the other Spartan answered. "I'm on the second story of a building with a window as big as one wall of the Sparring Cage." He said coldly. "I've got a four-by-four hole to cut, and then I'm all set. You guys are welcome to start without me though." There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice.<p>

"Just let us know when you're ready." Blaine said. He looked back at the Spartans still with him.

Landon and Christopher had immediately hopped into the LRV the other Pelican had dropped off and gone speeding after the Ghosts that were reported to have taken off. Thankfully, Victoria, Jason and Stephanie had chosen to stay and participate with the fight at hand.

"Everyone double-check your weapons." Samuel's voice echoed inside their helmets. Blaine, early on, had been shocked with Samuel's change of character. He'd been relatively quiet for damn-near eight years, and then suddenly revealed that he was, literally, a born leader.

Blaine checked the BR55HB Battle Rifle in his hands for any problems. Everything was in order. Clip, scope, barrel, and guard were all green. Next, he took the Rocket Launcher off his back and inspected the launch assembly. Finally, he did a quick sweep of his Assault Rifle.

He silently gave the thumbs-up to Samuel, and knew in the back of his mind that a green acknowledgement light had blinked once in the other Spartan's HUD.

"Everyone's good to go." Victoria said.

"The hole's done over here, if you guys are getting bored with just sitting around down there." Zeke said cynically over the comm-channel.

"'Bout **\*\*damn\*\*** time," Victoria said jokingly.

"Just get to work on those freaks before the Elites get here and take all the fun, okay?"

"You got it." Blaine said. He directed his thoughts at Samuel and Magnus, still aboard the Pelican. "How close are you two?"

"Just go on in," Samuel said. "We'll need a diversion anyway."

"Alright," he answered. "It's time to show the Covenant whose planet this is."

\* \* \*

>A Grunt called Yalin was working frantically to set up his Plasma Cannon on the hard ground under him after seeing the two human ships in the sky. He knew very well that the humans would be coming for their landing party, and they'd be armed.  
<p><em><strong>Very<strong>\_\_ armed,\_\_ he thought, setting the cannon

solidly against the ground.

Suddenly, there was a burst of gunfire and he heard another Grunt to his left scream out in pain before falling to the ground, dripping with a combination of methane and his own blood. Before Yalin could even turn to see, he watched a group of Jackals raise their shields and level their Plasma Pistols.

A second later, the ground around them exploded in a series of three blasts, and jagged pieces of metal flew in every direction. Yalin ducked to avoid being impaled, but could only watch as a huge being, covered in white and red armor, stepped up to the only surviving Jackal and smashed its energy shield with one punch from his hand.

Without a second's pause, the warrior grabbed the Jackal around the neck and crushed its throat before dropping it back on the ground. Roaring in fury, a minor Brute came barreling past Yalin from behind, charging the white and red monster. The soldier was facing away, and the Brute charged faster, foaming at the mouth.

CRACK!

A trail of smoke came from the right, leading right to the Brute's neck. The behemoth fell, twitching on the ground.

As if in response, Yalin heard more screams from his own species and some from Jackals and Brutes as well. He heard another Grunt scream, "they got leader! Run away!" and turned to see three similar soldiers all wreaking havoc around the Phantoms.

Yalin could barely believe his eyes and, for a moment, wondered if he was getting enough methane. One of the soldiers, clad in dark-blue, almost purple, armor, was carrying an Energy Sword like high-ranking Elites had always carried before they had abandoned the Covenant. The warrior ran around at speeds Yalin could barely follow, slicing helmets and **\*\*heads\*\*** right off of several of his fellow Unggoy (a.k.a. Grunts).

Another, in dark, golden armor was holding two one-handed weapons that Yalin had come to recognize as human-made machineguns, each one unleashing a hail of death on fellow Covenant soldiers. Yalin watched as one of his brethren stumbled to a mounted Plasma Cannon and began firing at the monster.

To his surprise, the first few shots hit and appeared to vaporize upon impact with the being's armor. In only a second, however, the soldier raised his arm and an enormous, circular shield that reminded the Grunt of the kind the Jackals wore appeared in front of him. It took over a dozen shots before the armored warrior pulled out something Yalin recognized immediately: a Plasma Grenade.

"Run!" The Grunt yelled to his fellow Unggoy. But, before the green-armored Grunt could respond, the gold-armored soldier primed the grenade, threw it, and it landed squarely on the turret-mounted Grunt's head.

Yalin heard the Grunt scream in agony as the bomb detonated, spraying his blood and chunks of his body in all directions.



And then, the monster turned to him.

\* \* \*

>Jason heard and felt his shields recharging as the Plasma Grenade detonated. It was a direct hit: attaching to the head of the Grunt that had been blasting him from the Plasma Cannon. The Grunt had even failed to get far enough away, and the explosion destroyed the turret as well. <p>As his shields recovered, he turned to the other Grunt he'd heard yell when the first had started firing on him. The small alien turned to run, but fell backwards and was reduced to backing away on its hands.<p>

Jason leveled his Assault Rifle and fired two-dozen shots, turning the lone Grunt into little more than alien paste. Before he could move, however, he heard another of the small aliens yell.

"Grenade!" the voice cried, and Jason turned to see five of the glowing blue balls all falling down on him from his right. Quickly, he raised his left arm, turned on the circular shield, and bent his knees, bracing himself.

\_Here we go,\_ he thought as the grenades descended. At the last second, he jumped right at them, and the momentum behind his shield propelled all five of the bombs back at the Grunts who had thrown them.

The aliens shrieked and screamed in terror as three of the grenades actually **\*\*stuck\*\*** to those who had thrown them. They ran in circles for a few seconds before the bombs detonated, looking like a miniature fireworks display.

**\*\*Hell yes\*\***." Jason said.

"Incoming!" Samuel's voice yelled in his ears, and he turned to see a UNSC Hornet flying only twenty feet above the three stationary Phantoms. The Hornet was a small support aircraft with a wing jutting out of the top of the cockpit on each side. On the ends of each wing was a jet engine connected to a turbo fan, which serve as the vehicle's propulsion. Also on each side of the cockpit are jumpseat platforms reaching backwards, capable of transporting troops.

And, on these platforms, stood the two giant Spartans: Magnus and Samuel.

\_How the \_\_Hell\_\_ does that thing even \_\_**\*\*support\*\***\_\_ those two?\_ Jason wondered.

Suddenly, the Hornet dove down, and Magnus leapt off the side of it, onto the top of one of the Phantoms. The aircraft swung right, and Samuel too jumped off, landing squarely on another of the dropships.

"This is **\*\*Spartan 025\*\*** of Zulu Company," Samuel said, "we have arrived."

\* \* \*

>Magnus quickly jumped down from the top of the Phantom and landed on one of the decks stretching across the sides. There was an open door

to the center of the ship, and he stepped in without regard for stealth, his Shotgun raised to his chest. <p>"Demon!" a Brute minor yelled the second he walked in the door. The beast charged him, but was more than three feet shorter than he was and inexperienced in the art of true combatâ€|at least, with a Spartan. The moment the alien was within reach, Magnus grabbed it by its arm and flung it out the door he'd just come through, off of the Phantom, without even pausing.<p>

He walked around two pillars to find several Grunts crowded around a single Brute Captain, at what he assumed were the central controls. They turned on him the second he rounded the second pillar.

"Hi," he said, and blasted one Grunt to Hell with one pull of the trigger on his Shotgun. The Brute Captain roared and pulled out a Brute Shot, a big, awkward-looking grenade-launcher with a huge bayonet attached to one end.

Magnus paid the alien no regard, however, and simply primed a Fragmentation Grenade. He tossed the grenade at the dead body of the Grunt and took cover behind a pillar.

A second later, one explosion sounded, and shrapnel flew in all directions. In the next half-second, though, six more explosions went off as every Plasma Grenade the Grunts had been carrying were ignited and detonated. Alien blood and body parts flew in all directions, spraying the entire ship.

Magnus came back around the pillar and planted the small C-12 charge that the pilot had given him before he departed the ship. Both he and Samuel had been given one. Their goal was to detonate two Phantoms, and capture the other.

With the ship cleared of resistance, Magnus set the timer for thirty-seconds and walked off the ship.

\* \* \*

>CRACK! <p>Another Brute fell to the ground, blood dripping from its jaw.<p>

CRACK! CRACK!

Somehow, a third Brute and \*\*three\*\* Grunts all fell down onto the parking lot concrete.

"Not bad, Zeke," Blaine said.

"I know." His fellow Spartan answered, and he could hear the 'CLICK' of another clip being snapped into place on the Sniper Rifle.

"Everyone, back!" Magnus' voice echoed in his helmet.  
"Phantom-number-two is about to go up in flames."

Blaine took a step back and, sure enough, there was a huge explosion as the first Phantom detonated in a haze of blue and red smoke. Purple pieces of Covenant metal flew in all directions, and the Covenant units on the ground looked stunned. As the smoke cleared, he could make out a small crater under where the ship had

been.

Suddenly, Blaine heard the whine of plasma being fired and turned to see that one of the two remaining Phantoms was shooting heavily at the second Pelican that was now preparing to land and deploy reinforcements. The plasma never let up, and it was forced to lift off again, lest the Marines inside be picked off the second they hit the ground.

That instant, he had an idea. "Hey Zeke," he said. "Cover me."

"Consider yourself covered."

Blaine focused on Stephanie. "Hey, you got a minute?"

There was a series of explosions as she fired four shots from the Fuel Rod Gun on her shoulder. Covenant bodies flew in all directions.

"Sure." She said. "What do you need?"

"You and I are going to decommission that damn plasma cannon." He pointed to the gun at the bottom of the Phantom.

A green light blinked once in the corner of his HUD.

\_Alright,\_ he thought, looking in awe at his enormous, biomechanical arms, \_time to see what these things can \_\_\*\*really\*\*\_\_ do.\_

He met Stephanie at the bottom of the Phantom and got underneath the cannon, suspended only about eight feet off the ground.

"Alright," he said, "now just grip right-"

CRACK!

There was a roar behind him and a dead Brute came skidding on the ground, stopping a meter from his feet.

"Okay," he said, continuing, "just grab one side, and help me pull."

Stephanie nodded, and gripped one side of the cannon with her almost purely-mechanical hands. Blaine gripped the opposite side and braced himself.

"Alright," he said, "on my count."

Stephanie nodded.

"Okay," he said, "one&#128;two&#128;three\*\*!"

Both of the super-powered Spartans pulled with all they had, and, at first, nothing happened. But, slowly, as they pulled harder, the very metal holding the cannon to the ship began to give, bending slightly before starting to peel off the Phantom's underbelly.

"Just&#128;a little&#128;more&#128;" Blaine said, struggling. He pulled with all he could and, \*\*finally\*\*, the metal gave way. The two Spartans

stumbled backwards as the cannon was ripped from the ship and fell into their hands.

Blaine smiled. They'd done it. He looked up to see two Brutes climbing down from one of the side decks of the Phantom.

"Covie bastards," he said, hefting his Rocket Launcher, "back to Hell with you."

Two 102-mm charges left the launcher and impacted with the Brutes' Power Armor. The limited shielding it provided failed instantly in the explosions, and the aliens were reduced to nothing but smoldering piles of alien parts.

"Wow," Stephanie said before bringing her Shotgun to bear, sidestepping, and blasting two shots into the belly of a Brute that had been charging Blaine from behind. He turned around just in time to watch another Brute go berserk at the death of its pack member and leap into the air.

\_Great,\_ he thought. The behemoth raised its arms into the air and brought them straight down as it landed only feet from Blaine's face. The Spartan put his hands up and caught the Brute's arms at the wrists.

"Die, human scum!" The creature yelled in a deep tone.

Blaine couldn't help but smile. He clenched his hands and felt the bones in the Brute's wrists start to give.

The monster let out a yell of rage and agony and flailed about, trying to get free, but Blaine's grip only tightened.

"Uh-oh," Blaine laughed mockingly, "this is gonna hurt." He tightened his grip as much as he could and felt every bone in the Brute's wrists shatter. Blaine let go, and the alien stumbled backward with its hands dangling from its forearms at strange angles.

Before the creature could recover, Blaine lowered his arms and thrust both fists into its stomach. The shot dented the armor considerably, completely broke any ribs the Brute might've had, and knocked it back a full eight meters. The alien skidded along the ground, writhing in pain, before coming to a stop.

The Brute tried to stand back up, but Blaine pinned it to the ground with his foot. "Tell any of those good-for-nothing Prophets you see in Hell that Zulu Company sends its regards." He said, and then smashed the creature's skull with his armored boot.

\* \* \*

>Victoria ran at top speed, zigzagging underneath the two remaining Phantoms and dodging plasma from all directions as she pulled the triggers on her two M6G Pistols as fast as she could. Sixteen shots rang out across the battlefield, and fourteen Grunts and two Jackals hit the concrete, blood flowing freely from holes in their heads.  
<p>Without slowing down, she ejected the empty clips from the guns and slid them down over two fresh ones being held magnetically on the armor covering her lower-back. In less than a second, she was firing again, mowing down the Covenant forces.<p>

Suddenly, she felt plasma impact her shields as a green-armored Grunt mounted a Plasma Cannon and began firing from her right. She changed course, running straight for the small Covenant soldier, and jumped when she was still twenty feet from the turret.

She spun around and flipped twice in the air, aiming straight down with her two pistols and blasting the alien's entrails onto the ground before landing ten feet behind the turret with her back to it.

"Too easy."

There was a roar behind her and she turned to see a blue-armored Brute charging her with two Brute Spikers, small pistol-like weapons that fired sharp, spike-like projectiles at high velocities. On the bottom of each Spiker was a sharp, curved blade used for melee attacks.

The Brute raised its arms above its head and was about to bring them down on her, but her enhanced reflexes allowed her to quickly kick the beast in the stomach and fire six rounds into its chest before her pistols were empty again. Its shielding failed, and the Power Armor it was wearing fell to the ground, no longer attached.

Victoria smiled behind her visor as the Brute fired the Spikers at her and she dodged most of the projectiles. The few that did hit her served only to slightly damage her shields.

"I hope not all Brutes are this stupid." She said, mostly to herself.

Almost like it was responding, the Brute charged again, swinging the Spikers blade-first through the air. Finally, a swing came from the right side, and Victoria dove forward slightly, landing on her hands and stretching both legs, bringing both feet up and smashing them into the Brute's chin. The shot knocked it up into the air before falling flat on the ground, dropping the Spikers as well.

Victoria dropped her M6G Pistols, fastened the two Brute Spikers to her thighs, and gripped the hilt of the Energy Sword on her back as the Brute stood up.

"Bring it," she said.

The alien roared and charged her, going crazy with rage. As it reached her though, she jumped, grabbed the tops of its shoulders, and front-flipped onto the ground behind it, landing squarely on her feet. The second she touched ground, she thrust both her elbows back, causing the blades fastened to her forearms to penetrate the Brute's back, impaling it in two places.

As the behemoth turned, she pulled the blades out, activated the Energy Sword and ran it through its chest. The white-hot blade penetrated hide, fur, skin and bone with ease, emerging cleanly out the creature's back. Victoria deactivated the blade, and the Brute fell to the ground.

Before she could rest, however, she heard footsteps to her right and

saw that yet another berserking Brute was about to charge right past her, toward Stephanie.

Without a second thought, she fastened the sword to her armor, pulled up both Spikers, and, with her back to the charging alien, brought her right arm up to her chest and swung back, out to the side. The blade on the bottom of the Spiker stabbed the un-armored Brute in the chest.

The Brute minor roared in pain, but Victoria paid it no heed. She brought her left arm up as well, spun left a full 180 degrees with her arm out, and buried the blade of the other Spiker in the Brute's back. Before it could recover from the shock, she took three steps back and let loose a half-clip from both Spikers into the beast.

With more than forty spikes sticking out of its hide, the Brute fell to the ground, into a growing puddle of its own blood.

CRACK!

Victoria saw the smoke trail and turned to see a Brute, not three feet behind her, fall to the ground in a heap.

"Saved your life," Zeke's voice rang proudly in her ears.

Victoria was about to respond, but stopped when her enhanced hearing picked something up. She turned around and instantly saw what she'd heard coming.

"Zeke, help Jason!" She yelled into the helmet. She could almost feel the other Spartan take aim as two Ghosts sped toward Jason. He was on the ground with light weapons, and nowhere to go.

CRACK!

The Brute driver of one Ghost stumbled, but kept driving, right at Jason.

CRACK!

This time, the beast's helmet popped off, but the Ghost still didn't slow down.

CRACK!

The Brute fell clean out of the Ghost as blood poured from its skull. The purple-colored vehicle slowed and stopped.

CLICK!

"Shit!" Zeke's voice rang over the intercom as the gun told him the clip was empty. Meanwhile, the second Ghost, driven by a Grunt, was still coming right for Jason, and had just activated its boosted propulsion systems, causing its speed to more than double.

\* \* \*

>"Damned four-shot clips," Zeke scowled furiously and cursed himself

and his mistake as he slapped another clip into the rifle. He took aim, but it was too late. Victoria was behind the Ghost in his line of fire, and he could only watch as the vehicle closed the already-miniscule gap between itself and Jason. <p>To Ezekiel's surprise, however, Jason didn't move, he only braced himself by turning a shoulder toward the Ghost and digging his back leg into the concrete. The Ghost sped closer to him.<p>

"Jason, **\*\*move\*\***!" Victoria's voice echoed loudly across all communication lines. Zeke growled, annoyed, and blocked her out.

Finally, as if in slow motion, the Ghost closed the last few feet, and Jason surprised everyone. Rather than move out of the way, he lifted his huge, biomechanical front leg and timed it perfectly to slam it down and bury it in the front of the light Covenant vehicle.

The results came instantly. His back leg was pushed a few inches back in the concrete, but it held, and the Ghost's metal front continued to slide, causing his front leg make a large hole that stretched for almost two feet before it stopped entirely. As if that weren't enough, the sudden change in speed caused the Grunt driver to come flying out of the driver's seat, over Jason's head.

Zeke smiled as his fellow Spartan pulled a Plasma Grenade from his belt, primed it, and threw it at the Grunt while it was still flying through the air. The grenade detonated before the Grunt could even start to come down, and it triggered the three grenades the alien had been holding.

"Looks like freakin' 4th of July down there," Zeke said, watching the big, blue explosions with a sense of detachment.

He was pulled from his scope, however, when his shark-level sense of smell picked something up. He brought the rifle down and sniffed the air.

\_Methane, \_he thought, and then, with disgust, \_and  
\_\_**\*\*Brute.\*\***\_\_

Suddenly, he heard heavy footsteps on the floor above him, and made a decision. Holding the rifle in one hand, he pulled the M6D Pistol from his side and fired several shots into the floor where the footsteps were. As he'd suspected, the Covenant reacted chaotically, causing the floor to give way and spill a Brute and three Grunts onto the floor in front of him.

Unfortunately, this wasn't just any Brute. This one was a Brute Chieftain, fully-armored in red and black Power Armor and holding an enormous Gravity Hammer. It stood up and pulled the hammer back as it stared at Ezekiel.

\_Of \_\_**\*\*course\*\***\_ he thought, taking a quick glance up at the ceiling, and at heaven beyond, \_I would get the **\*\*freakin'\*\*** Chieftain. Hope they gave me a good Life Insurance policy.\_

The Grunts scattered, but the Chieftain immediately charged. Zeke fired shots from the M6D until the clip was empty, then threw it to the side as the Brute got closer. When it was almost in reach, the

Chieftain raised the hammer high above its head and Zeke did the only thing he could think of: he leveled his Sniper Rifle and threw it several feet up above him, through the huge hole in the ceiling.

The hammer came down, and Ezekiel jumped sideways, barely avoiding the large, spherical magnetic field that erupted from it upon impact with the ground. Before the Brute could bring it back up, however, he stepped on the head of the hammer, jumped up, spun a full 360, and planted the heel of his armored foot as hard as he could into the side of the Brute's face, twisting the ornate helmet at a strange angle and sending the beast careening into the wall.

As the alien hit the wall, Zeke looked up and caught his Sniper Rifle perfectly in his hands, leveled it at the Brute, and almost couldn't believe the open shot he found. When he'd kicked the Brute's helmet, he'd twisted it on the Brute's head, and a small, quarter-size hole could be seen between the helmet and the rest of the armor.

"See ya."

CRACK!

The bullet from the rifle covered the distance in a fraction of a second, went straight through the Brute's neck, passing through arteries and leaving it a bleeding mess on the floor of the building. Zeke turned around to see the three Grunts all fleeing toward the door.

"Oh-ho-ho," he laughed wickedly as he picked the Gravity Hammer up off the ground. "Oh **\*\*no\*\*** you **\*\*don't\*\***." He brought the hammer up behind his shoulder like a baseball bat.

\* \* \*

>"Open fire, Chris!" Landon yelled as he drove the Warthog around the street corner and found the last of the Ghosts. He and Landon had already blasted one into nothingness and sent two more back to the Phantoms for the others to dispose of, but this one had been a real problem to catch, mostly because of the boost-system. <p>However, this time, the triple-barreled machinegun hit home, and the Ghost exploded as its Grunt driver fell out of the seat, bleeding. The purple vehicle was reduced to scrap in a matter of seconds.<p>

"Not bad, Chris," he said, "not bad at all."

His sentence was punctuated by a loud 'SLAM' and two Grunts crashing through the second-story, brick wall of the building Ezekiel was in. Zeke stood at the edge, looking down, with what looked like a giant hammer in his hands.

"**\*\*Damn\*\*** Zeke," Chris said, "What'd they ever do to you?"

"It's been a long damned day." He said, and then jumped out onto the ground. Landon pulled the Warthog up beside him.

"Need a ride?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." He said, and got into the passenger seat.



\* \* \*

>Samuel had had enough. For more than ten minutes, he'd been pinned just outside the Phantom he'd been dropped off on. There were over a dozen Covenant soldiers inside, and it seemed like each of them had enough Plasma Grenades to wage war all by themselves. He simply couldn't get inside. <p>"That's <strong>it<strong>." He said, and pulled the Rocket Launcher off his back. "No more games now, freaks."

He took a step inside and waited until he saw the glowing blue bombs being hurdled toward him. Instantly, he stepped back out and made a mental note of where they'd all come from.

"Time to die," he said.

He took a deep breath and ran inside, firing two rockets at the area where most of the Covenant were huddled together. If he'd thrown grenades, they'd have scattered, but with rockets, there was simply no time. The two charges detonated, and alien limbs decorated the walls of the ship.

"Die, Demon!" a Brute yelled, and Samuel turned to see the beast holding two Spikers. It unloaded both clips in his direction, and he dodged most of them, but was still hit with over twenty of the projectiles, the sheer number of which caused his shields to dwindle.

Without a word, Samuel dropped the Rocket Launcher and pulled both the Assault Rifle and the Shotgun from his back. With his huge hands, he could hold them both as if they were light, one-handed weapons. He held the trigger down on the Assault Rifle, and the hail of bullets impacted the alien's armor. At the same time, he used his right hand to pull the trigger on the Shotgun, then racked the pump between his stomach and inner-arm before firing again.

In a few seconds, when the psychotic alien was reduced to a bloody pulp, Samuel moved on, toward the control panel, or rather, what was left of it after the two shots from the Rocket Launcher.

"Finally," he said, and attached a small pack of C-12 to the panel. He set the timer for thirty-seconds, just as Magnus had done, and walked slowly out of the ship.

\* \* \*

>Victoria watched as Samuel emerged from the second Phantom and jogged quickly away from it. <p>"Everybody get back." He said, and any soldiers nearby immediately backed away.<p>

A few seconds later, the second Phantom exploded just as the first had done, in a haze of smoke and with jagged pieces of it flying in all directions.

"Great," Victoria said, "only one more." She looked over to see that there were only a few scattered Grunts running around on the ground, and the rest of the Covenant had been taken care of. All that remained was the final Phantom.

Suddenly, that very Phantom started to lift off.

"Oh, **\*\*Hell\*\*!**" she yelled, "They're retreating!"

Knowing that she was the only present Spartan fast enough to catch the ship, she took off at a dead sprint and leapt a full sixteen feet in the air, barely catching the bottom of one of the side decks as the Phantom gained height.

She pulled herself up and grabbed the hilt of the Energy Sword as she stepped carefully inside.

There were four Covenant soldiers left onboard: two Brute minors, a Grunt, and a shielded Jackal.

\_A regular cake-walk,\_ she thought.

The Grunt walked by the door and she activated the sword, using it to cut open a hole in the alien's breathing device and letting methane flood the inside of the ship. The Grunt began to run around frantically, and she quickly primed her last Plasma Grenade and stuck it to the creature's back.

As it ran to its Brute leaders, one of them saw the grenade and yelled as it tried desperately to point the Grunt away, but the smaller alien was lost in its own suffocation and ran closer, finally detonating only a few feet from one of the Brutes.

When the explosion cleared, one Brute was critically injured, and both the Grunt and Jackal were dead.

Victoria pulled out the sword up and charged inside, quickly gutting the live Brute from behind and dropping the body in front of the already-injured alien.

"Demon!" it yelled, and stood up. Instead of charging her as she'd expected, however, the alien leveled a Brute Shot and began swinging at her with the huge bayonet on the end.

Victoria turned sideways and used the blade attached to her left arm to parry the bayonet, bringing it up over her head and spinning the Brute around. Before she could strike, it lashed around again, swinging madly until she caught the blade of the Brute Shot in between two of the curved 'blades' on her forearm. With the blade firmly lodged there, she spun around, jerking it from the creature's hands, onto the floor, and ran the sword through the alien's side.

The Brute roared and fell onto the ground, bleeding terribly. Victoria reached a hand down toward it, as if out of pity. It reached its huge hand up to hers, probably to pull her down, but before it could grab her, she gripped its wrist and twisted, snapping the bones like twigs.

Again, it roared, and she pinned its neck to the deck when it didn't cease quickly enough. "I hope your kind enjoyed its time on Earth," she said as the Brute coughed and choked for air, "because you've worn out your welcome."

And the coughing stopped suddenly as the Energy Sword glistened and slit the alien one final time.

"This is **\*\*Spartan 008\*\*** of Zulu Company," Victoria said, opening a communications channel with the Pelicans that had dropped them off. "All Covenant have been neutralized, and we have the Phantom. Mission accomplished."

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: Please, as always, I appreciate and will respond to any reviews I get. Critiquing, compliments, whatever. I just like to hear how things are being interpreted and what everyone likes. Also, just as a heads-up, next time, I'll have two chapters. One will be fairly short (like the augmentation one before), and the other will be the now-typical length. Thanks for reading, everyone!<strong>

## 21. Chapter 20: War & Politics

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Well, this is the next one on my list. Yes, it's short. It's informational. BUT, I needed it. So, I'll have the next chapter up soon (probably for Turkey Day...happy Thanksgiving, all). This one is about 3,000 words...the next will be action-packed and back to the normal length. So, first...reviews!\*\*

**\*\*(I had a LOT this time...thank you to EVERYONE!!!)\*\***

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey, no problem. You think of any cool fight-scenes or ideas (and this goes for anyone), feel free to send me a message. Don't put it on here...as that spoils it if I do use it. No guarantees, but if it's cool enough, I'll see what I can do. Anyways, thanks very much for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*GuardianXAngel:** Hey, no worries at ALL. Trust me, the Spartan Laser will get some real exercise before this is over. And, by the way, which Machinegun is your favorite? The Assault Rifle, the SMG's, or something like the vehicle-mounted LAAG? Just curious. Thanks again for your review and, in regards to the homework...TRUST ME, I understand what you mean. Why do you think I only get out one chapter a week, most of the time? lol. ;) \*\*

**\*\*...Curse you, Calculus. Burn and die. Or just die...whatever puts a cap on the homework.\*\***

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** (My Lord...I screw your name up the first time...every single time I try to type it...) YAY for my reviewers! lol. Glad you liked.\*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** Man, you get my "Review of the Week" award. That one really made me laugh. Anyway, I'm glad you liked it. Hopefully, you'll continue to be pleased with it. I'm really anxious to write and get this next chapter up (21), so let me know what you think! Thanks!\*\*

**\*\*Trueshot159:** Hey, long time no see. Glad to have you reading again, and I'm glad you liked it. Also, in regards to your idea about the stealth...I'm debating using the "Cloaking" equipment-item like they do in-game, to make their battles a little more like the game itself. Actually, this is something I want some feedback on, if I can get it.

Just, if you (and everyone else) would, give me your preference, if I use cloaking like the Elites had in H:CE and H2, or like it is in H3. Just let me know.\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: You want real action? I'll get you some real action. Just stick with me a bit longer, and you'll see it firsthand. As for your comments on the Spartans...yeah, I couldn't do them without personalities. It's not in me. That's okay for a videogame, but not for a book. And...Zeke...lol, he's annoying and sarcastic but...that's what I was going for sometimes.\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hola, friend! I still can't believe how fast you read the whole thing. Astounding. Thanks a lot for all the compliments. And, in addition, I've thought some more about the ideas we discussed...I'm gonna have some real fun with all this. Thanks for all your help, man.\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Hehehehe..."almost" only counts in hand-grenades and horseshoe. Thanks for reviewing.\*\*

\*\*TheHuntedOne: LOL, you really have a thing for Blaine, don't you?\*\*

\*\*A, E: Well...yeah...lol.\*\*

\*\*B: ...Zeke needs time too. ;) \*\*

\*\*C: ...They need time too. If I don't give them any, they get depressed and don't show up to my other chapters. lol.\*\*

\*\*D: Hey, seriously, thanks for the compliments. I'm glad you liked it. I think, with your liking for the Cyborgs, you might get a real kick out of the special armor types they'll get later on (just something for you to think about).\*\*

\*\*numaman: Yes, it was a LOT of fun to write. This one here...not so much. The next one? Oh yes. I'll enjoy that one too. Also, I promise, next time around, I'll give you vehicles galore. My word. Thanks for the review!\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: lol, yes they are. But...did you like it? lol. I wasn't sure. Hope so... \*\*

\*\*Raven of Alaska: Hello! Thanks for the compliment, and I hope you'll stick around for a while. Also...the quote...well, in hindsight, no, it doesn't make the most sense, but it sounded really cool in my head, lol. haha. Thanks again!\*\*

\*\*1 Way Ticket: lol, "smack talk." You know me...it's gotta be there. Thanks for reviewing! And that's right! If you're of alien-origin and don't have four mandibles and walk around on two legs, then you'd better run. The cage has been rattled, and Zulu Company is out and ready to go! lol, thanks again...hope you feel better...: ) \*\*

\*\*Masquerade867: Wow, I just missed you when I put the next chapter up. Sorry about that! Thanks very much for your compliment!\*\*

\*\*NOW...finally...Chapter 20... \*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><p>

**\*\*Chapter 20:\*\***

**\*\* - War & Politics - \*\***

**\*\*1500 Hours - December 21, 2552\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground - Recovery Building\*\***

"Damn it, Jason." Corporal Charles said, staring blankly at the Spartan's recently re-armored leg. His last stunt with a Covenant Ghost had completely totaled the armor on his right leg. Of course, the super-soldier had never even felt it, but the MJOLNIR armor sure did.

"Sorry, sir," he answered. "It was that or be run over."

The Corporal rolled his eyes. "You know, Jason, I **\*\*remember\*\*** teaching you all how to **\*\*jump\*\*** in basic."

Jason laughed as he sat up in the hospital bed. "Heat of battle, sir," he said with a shrug. "I guess I just forgot."

Charles laughed. In reality, he couldn't care less about the Spartans' armor. It could be replaced. They, however, could not. "Just get out of the way next time, so I don't have to listen to the doctors bitch and moan."

"Got it," he said. The Corporal was about to leave when Jason added, "so, are Blaine and Stephanie doing alright?"

Charles nodded. "They're actually back to one-hundred-percent, already." He said. The two Spartans had just **\*\*slightly\*\*** overworked their mechanical muscles in ripping the plasma weapon from the bottom of one of the Phantoms. "I already saw the two of them, and I told them that, next time, I want them to **\*\*please\*\*** just shoot the damn thing."

\* \* \*

>"So, to be clear, what **<strong>exactly</strong>** are you doing to me **\*\*this\*\*** time?" Ezekiel asked the female scientist messing with the four mounted blades on his armor.

She looked up as she pulled off the armor around his left elbow-joint. "Under orders from the General, I'm installing bio-electrical, magnetic components into offensive weapon-systems for high-energy containment purposes."

Zeke rolled his eyes. "English, please."

The scientist's eyes looked up to the ceiling, searching for words. "I'm putting magnets in your armor that will produce a magnetic field around the blades on your joints, similar to those on a Covenant

Energy Sword."

"And **\*\*why\*\*** do I need a magnetic field generator?"

Now it was the woman's turn to roll her eyes, annoyed. "Well, for the plasma-generating systems I have to implant within the offensive systems, of course."

Zeke's head suddenly jerked away from the wall he was staring at, right into the eyes of the scientist. "What are you talking about?"

She appeared to be getting more annoyed by the second. "The General has ordered the Augmentation Department to further supplement your battle abilities by implanting both a plasma-generating device and a small magnetic field generator within your armor. The magnetic field will be active at all times, and the magnets will shift to keep it aligned perfectly around your offensive mounts. However, the plasma will only be generated at specific times, like when you bend your elbows or knees for an offensive strike. When you're finished, the plasma will be dispensed from the armor."

Ezekiel blinked a dozen times, trying to process all of what he'd just been told. "So, I'm getting Energy Swords mounted to my knees and elbows?"

She rolled her eyes again. "Yes." She said, nodding. "Think of it that way. You and Victoria both are."

Zeke smiled. \_Cool,\_ he thought, and suddenly saw a fatal flaw in the almost-great idea. He pulled his arm back from the scientist's grip.

"And how are these magnets going to shift on their own to match the blade? Or, more importantly, how are the plasma-generators going to 'know' just when to come on and off. What if I'm just bending my leg to sit down or something?"

The annoyed look in her eyes was replaced with one of pure irritation and frustration. "**\*\*That's\*\*** why you're getting an AI installed." She said with a tone popular when speaking to toddlers. "The AI will control the plasma-generators and magnets. Without it, the plasma won't be created at all."

Zeke nodded, reaching his arm back out to her again. "Alright," he said, "I understand."

She scoffed loudly. "Fitting," she mumbled.

"What?"

"The AI you got," she said. "It's **\*\*fitting\*\***."

Zeke was getting tired of playing games. "What are you talking about?"

"Your AI," she said. "Its name is Demon."

\* \* \*

>Corporal Charles turned off the radio transmission, furious. Even after all the Spartans had been through, after all they'd <strong>become</strong>, the government **still** wasn't content to just let them fight. No, **somehow**, they weren't good enough yet.

\_No,\_ he thought miserably, \_not \_**again**. **\_Every\_** time we've had a **\_single\_** success in the second set of augmentations, they come down here and they strip-mine us in the way of Spartans. **\_Three\_** Spartans,\_ he reminded himself, **\_three\_** of them in the last two **\_decades\_**, and not **\_one\_** of them survived their damned 'final augmentation' protocol. \_

"Damn it all."

He looked at the clock. It was after six. They'd be arriving at Zulu Training Ground in less than two hours—and they'd be taking the Spartans—**his** Spartans.

\* \* \*

>"Man, I still can't believe you just <strong>stood</strong> there like a freakin' statue." Christopher said to Jason as he sat down on his bunk. It was now late in the evening, nearing eight o'clock, and the Spartans were awaiting dinner, passing the time by reflecting on their last victory.

"It was that or get my ass ran over." Jason answered, laughing as he flexed his biomechanical leg and the new armor covering it. "'Course, I wouldn't have **had** **to** if **someone** had just **shot** the damn Grunt." He glanced over at Zeke with a smirk on his face.

"I **told** you, Vic was in my line of fire." Ezekiel snapped with a half-hearted look of seriousness.

"Yeah," Jason laughed, "whatever."

"Well," Zeke said, letting a smirk crawl across his face, "maybe next time I won't shoot the Brute **either**." He walked away and sat down on his bunk.

Jason thought for a second what he might've done if the Brute had come at him too. He pondered how he could stomp both Ghosts for a moment, and then abandoned the idea in favor of stomping one and sticking the other with a Plasma Grenade. "I'd have managed." He said.

At this, Blaine stood up, brushing by Samuel to get to close to the center of the room. "So," he started, hesitating slightly, "did anyone else get an AI installed today?"

Jason was puzzled. He'd had what the scientists called a "minor AI" installed, but the electronic entity had no personality and was there for the sole purpose of assisting in providing a visual readout on his HUD for his biomechanical parts.

"Zeke and I both got one." Victoria said quickly.

**"Only** for the bloodlust," Zeke growled, not moving from his bed.

"I don't need some two-bit, computer-generated nuisance telling me how mow down the Covenant's miserable excuses for soldiers."

Victoria laughed. "And for the plasma-mounts," she said.

"Plasma-mounts?"

"Our offensive mounts are being altered to have, in essence, plasma-coating, and will basically become Energy Swords on our limbs."

"Nice," Samuel said.

"Please," Zeke said, "the whole idea behind an AI is ridiculous. We're supposed to be the best. And, personally, I don't like the thought of having some computer entity floating around in my head."

Jason stared at him, mouth open. "Is someone having a bad day?" He asked, amused.

Zeke scowled, but said nothing.

"Moving on," Blaine interrupted, looking at Jason, "both Stephanie and I got simple AI's installed for readouts on our cybernetic parts. I was guessing that both you and Landon were given the same."

Jason nodded and looked over to Landon, who was doing the same. "They're barely even AI's." He said. "They have no voice, no 'mind,' no personality of any kind. All they really are is an extension to our suits' neuro-interface to tell us when our cybernetic parts are having issues."

"Spartans," the intercom speakers clicked on in the corners of the room. Jason immediately recognized the Corporal's voice, but he sounded deathly grim. "Report outside at once."

\_Great,\_ Jason thought, \_this day just gets better and better.\_

\* \* \*

><p><p>

Samuel let his hands clench and unclench as he walked down the hall from the Spartans' barracks. Both he and Magnus had also had minor adjustments made to their armor. Only, in their case, the change wasn't technological or biological. It was purely mechanical. Both of the enormous Spartans had had short, metal rods connected to the structure of the armor surrounding their wrists.

Samuel had realized, during their last fight with the Covenant, that his giant body packed an equally-enormous punch, and while his hands could easily withstand the blow, his wrists almost instinctively bent on impact. The bones in his arms were enhanced, and were pretty much immune to any thought of cracking, but a little extra support never hurt anyone.

At least, that was the scientists' take on it.



"Magnus," he said, looking slightly up at the other Spartan, "how do your wrists feel after having the rods put in?"

Magnus shrugged, his giant soldiers coming up over Samuel's head. "I feel fine." He said plainly. "I'm more worried about everyone else, and their AI's."

Samuel nodded as they opened the front doors and walked outside, seven other Spartans right behind them.

"What the Hell?"

In front of them were three large vans, similar to the ones that had taken them to Zulu Training Ground years ago, except that these three vans had no markings whatsoever and were completely black.

And, around these vans, stood a dozen men in lab-coats, four in Marine-style fatigues, Corporal Charles, General Malone, and another man in a white suit. Samuel immediately noticed a pistol at the man's side.

"Spartans," the man said with a smile. Samuel felt his blood run cold. "I'm here from the Office of Naval Intelligence."

"Oh Hell," Zeke's voice echoed in his ear, along with every other Spartan's. Samuel smiled behind his visor.

"The nine of you made quite a name for yourselves in Phoenix." He said, still smiling. "In fact, that's why I'm here."

At this point, the Corporal interrupted. "Spartans, this is Captain-

"Names won't be necessary, Corporal." The man said, cutting him off. "You and General Malone here know **\*\*exactly\*\*** who I am, and they know I'm from ONI. That's **\*\*more\*\*** than sufficient." His tone was suddenly cold and sharp.

Samuel found himself growing with anticipation as the four military-dressed men stepped forward at once.

"Now," the Captain said, turning back to the Spartans, and looking right at Magnus. "What you all need to know, is that two of you are coming with us."

Samuel watched the Corporal's face turn to a grimace. Malone seemed almost chipper, though.

"I don't understand." Samuel said, stepping forward. He was head of Zulu Company. This was his responsibility, his place.

The Captain smiled again. "Good," he said. He pointed to Magnus. "You're one of the ones coming with us." He said. Next, he looked directly at Victoria. "And you'll be joining him."

Samuel found himself shaking his head subconsciously, trying to process what this arrogant, annoying ONI spook was saying. "I'm sorry," he said. "You're taking part of my team?"

"Well," he answered smugly, getting defensive. "It's really not **\*\*your\*\*** team, is it? It's **\*\*my\*\*** team. ONI funded this little science project, and now we're taking a couple of you in for some additional testing. You'll have the female back in less than 72 hours. As for the giant here," he looked at Magnus, "we've got **\*\*big\*\*** plans for him."

\* \* \*

>Magnus reached down under his bed, grasping his duffel bag and pulling it up to him. It wasn't a typical "packed bag," though. This one carried a Shotgun, an Assault Rifle, two M6G Pistols, and, as of the 19th of December, two Brute Spikers as well. In addition, there over a dozen clips of ammo, several grenades wrapped in foam, and a med-kit kept inside. <p>"Hey," a voice came from behind him. He turned around to see Blaine and Ezekiel stepping into the room. "You wanted to see us?"<p>

Zeke's face lacked the arrogant smirk Magnus had come to expect, and Blaine looked like he was working to look emotionless. It didn't come as natural to him as it did to a couple of the other Spartans.

"I figured, with your leaving and allâ€|that I'd be pretty low on the list of people you wanna talk to, like **\*\*just\*\*** above General Malone." Zeke said with a ghost of a smile tugging at his face.

Magnus felt himself smirk a bit. "You are." He said bluntly. "But 'want' and 'need' are two different things."

The two smaller Spartans walked toward him until they were less than two meters away. Blaine sat down on one of the bunks, looking up at him.

"Why did you call us in here, Magnus?" Zeke asked, suddenly impatient, but still with a neutral tone.

"I need to ask the two of you a favor." Magnus answered, unsure really of how to ask the two Spartans what was on his mind.

"And that is?"

Magnus paused, trying to place the words. Suddenly, what had been bothering him for over an hour seemed ridiculous.

"Magnus," Zeke snapped, "what is it?"

"I need the two of you to watch Victoria." He said without even fully realizing he'd said it.

Instantly, the two Spartans were looking at him like he was insane. "She's a Spartan, Magnus." Blaine said calmly. "Not only that, she's very capable of taking care of herselfâ€|perhaps more so than most of us."

"I know." The giant Spartan answered, trying to rationalize what he was saying, first to himself, and then to the others. "I know she's a capable fighter, even more so than the majority of us, and I know she can take care of herself-

"So what the **\*\*Hell\*\*** are we in here for?" Zeke asked.

"Look," Magnus said, "I know she's a full-fledged Spartan. I know she's a skilled fighter and soldier. The truth is, though, that she's reckless. She always has been. She could've been killed last time when she boarded that ship all by herself, but she did it anyway."

The two faces staring at him softened slightly.

"Are you sure you just don't still have feelings for her?" Zeke asked, somehow without an ounce of cynicism or sarcasm. "I mean, as you did before the augmentations?"

Magnus shook his head. He'd thought of that already. "No," he said. "Whatever chemicals were supposed to suppress sex-drives in Spartansâ€|they worked. I still care about her, but not like that. She'sâ€|she's like family, like a little sister to me."

"Rightâ€|" Zeke's voice trailed off as he rolled his eyes.

"So, what exactly are you asking us for, Magnus?" Blaine asked.

"I just want you two to watch her and to watch out **\*\*for\*\*** her."

"We already will." Blaine said, nodding. "We're a team, **\*\*damn it\*\***, and we intend to keep it that way."

Magnus smiled. He'd expected no less from Blaine Everson. "Just promise me," he said, "that, as long as you're around, you'll watch over her, when I can't."

Zeke scoffed. "You don't **\*\*get\*\*** **\*\*it\*\***." He said. "We're not **\*\*babysitters\*\***. We're **\*\*Spartans\*\***. And, as irritating as she is, even **\*\*I've\*\*** accepted that she's an incredible soldier **\*\*more\*\*** than capable of holding her own without a bodyguard."

"Just promise me, **\*\*okay\*\*** Zeke?" Magnus said, growing frustrated. \_Doesn't he think I **\*\*know\*\*** how it sounds? I've been trying to figure out what I'm saying for over an **\*\*hour\*\*** now. I didn't just randomly decide to have this conversation, damn it.\_

"I promise." Blaine said. "As long as I'm around, I'll do what I can to make sure you get to see her when you come back to us."

"Thank you." He turned to Zeke. "Well?"

"Alright," Zeke said, a cruel smile taking over his features. "I'll make you a deal."

Magnus rolled his eyes. \_Of course.\_

"I'll watch her, as best I can, until you return, on the condition that you promise me you won't go dying on us in some lab somewhere with those ONI spooks. I promise to do this, you have to promise to rejoin us and finish this war."

Magnus felt a smile creeping across his face. "And, supposing I die?"

The usual smirk returned to the smaller Spartan. "Well, then you're breaking your promise, and, when I finally **\*\*do\*\*** kick the bucket, I'm gonna be right beside you, reminding you that you broke it, for the rest of **\*\*eternity\*\***."

Blaine laughed. "So, if you break the promise, you get to deal with Zeke once you die."

**\*\*Perfect\*\***," Magnus said, nodding and smiling. "If I break the promise, I'm going to Hell."

"Essentially," Zeke said, shrugging as his smirk returned. "So, do we have a deal?"

Magnus nodded, and the two Spartans stood up and started to walk out. The enormous Spartan turned to finish situating his bag, but stopped when the footsteps halted abruptly.

"Hey, Magnus," Ezekiel's voice echoed coldly.

"Yeah?"

"These emotions," he said, "these feelings about Victoria," he paused for several seconds. "They make for a great big brotherâ€¦"

Magnus felt himself begin to smile, and then Zeke finished.

"â€¦But a lousy Spartan."

And he left the room.

\* \* \*

>Two hours later, Blaine watched as the three vans pulled out. In one of them, Victoria was no-doubt sitting cross-legged with her eyes closed, mere <strong>inches</strong> from snapping and telling the ONI spooks exactly what she thought of them.

\_A firecracker to the end,\_ he thought.

In the other, Magnus was being held. Blaine couldn't fathom the idea of being taken for even more augmentations when they had **\*\*barely\*\*** survived the others. And, to make matters worse, the Corporal had informed him that, of the three Spartans that had **\*\*ever\*\*** made it through the second augmentations on the Training Ground before Zulu Company, all three were taken for "additional testing" and ended up dying at the hands of the ONI scientists.

And Magnus was next.

"Don't forget," Blaine said, watching the van as it went further down the road. "You made us a promise."

## 22. Chapter 21: Attack On Zulu Company

**\*\*Author's Notes:** First of all, I apologize for the wait. With the Thanksgiving holiday colliding with the due dates for several college applications, AND a very busy break from school in general...I simply couldn't get this one up in the time I wanted. Again, my apologies.

Second, it's not as long as the "standard," but it's about 5,400 words, and it's "Part 1" of this "segment" of my story. More details AFTER you read it, at the bottom of the page... (No skipping...lol)\*\*

\*\*Now, real quick, Reviews:\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Sounds good to me. Thanks a lot.\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: Hey, thanks for the compliments. For one, I agree entirely on your take of ONI. I may be wrong, but I hated them in the books, and I hate them now. As for the plasma...well, as TheHuntedOne noted, I have a thing for plasma.\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: Yeah...you, Great Valley Guardian and I are in agreement: we hate ONI with a passion. Thanks very much for the compliment and for reviewing.\*\*

\*\*TheHuntedOne: Here we go...lol\*\*

\*\*A: lol, no problem. Blaine's a cool character. Coffee though...ever had Monster?\*\*

\*\*B: I understand. I went back and read through some of it. Hopefully you'll like the balance in this next one better. Let me know, okay?\*\*

\*\*C: Actually, I didn't give enough information for it, but the way it went through my head was that the Brute Chieftain was dropped with the rest of the troops, but when someone started picking his soldiers off from a building, he took a few Grunts and went after the sniper. My bad...should've explained more.\*\*

\*\*D, E, F: Yeah...I've got some special armor "permutations" planned for the two cyborgs, but these will actually be of some help in battle, as opposed to being for show. They won't come into play for a bit, and I don't have many of the details finalized yet, but if you have any ideas, you're more than welcome to toss them at me. (And yes, I am looking into offensive "mounts," such as lasers or other heavy weapons)\*\*

\*\*G: Well, bye-bye for a bit, anyway.\*\*

\*\*H, I: I've got some ideas. Unfortunately, they won't come into play for a long while, so I can't tell you anything for fear of spoiling it for you. As for my using more plasma...maybe, lol. Yes, I have a fascination with material that can be "controlled" in order to make swords that cut through alien bodies like they're paper. What can I say? That's freakin' sweet.\*\*

\*\*J: Thank you!\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Yes, another informative one. Thanks for the compliment. I thought it was okay...just boring to write. As for the promises made...yeah, there'll be problems down the line. That's all I'm gonna say.\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Oh, I promise, they're taken care of. No worries there. Thanks a lot for reviewing, and I hope to keep the work

coming.\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: Hey, thank you for reviewing and complimenting my work! Really, when I was writing the chapter, it was like pulling teeth. I wanted so bad to just move right on, into...well, what's ahead, lol. Oh, and in regards to your math homework...I feel for ya. Although, I'll say that I'm a little better off, since exams aren't for another month. phew\*\*

\*\*Trueshot159: Hey, I've been giving your stealth-field idea a lot of thought, and I might try something like it down the line. If I do, all kudos go to you on that one! Thanks for compliments, too. :)\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hey man! Glad you liked that one. This one's got the alien blood you were waiting for. I don't like it anything like I did "Lights Out," but I think it's okay. Do me a favor and let me know what you think, lol. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*1 way ticket: There she is! Yeah...sry 'bout Magnus and Victoria. I promise, they're coming back, lol. As for your comment on Zeke's "alias," as you all like to laugh about...well, I don't know. You'd have to ask Zeke. ;) And, for the record, I'm glad I didn't quit too. Yesterday...hehe, you're welcome. :) I was happy to come.\*\*

\*\*Now, with those done and after a several-day wait, I present Chapter 21.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><p>

\*\*Chapter 21:\*\*

\*\* - Attack On Zulu Company - \*\*

\*\*0200 Hours - December 28, 2552\*\*

\*\*Covenant Carrier: Location Unknown\*\*

"Noble Prophet," Vattinus started, "the humans responsible for the losses in our last assault have been located and the Phantoms are en route." Even as a Brute Chieftain, Vattinus was weary of making announcements to the Hierarch.

"Good," the Prophet answered, hovering several feet from the ground in his throne. His face was stoic, without even a hint of emotion. "It is the will of the gods: destroy them all."

Vattinus bowed his head low, grinning. "Of course."

\* \* \*

>"<strong>Relax<strong> already," the doctor said impatiently. "You're not going to feel anything, so just \*\*calm down\*\*."

Victoria tried desperately to calm down. \*\*Really\*\*, she did. But, it just wasn't happening for her. She was strapped to a hospital bed with a half-dozen doctors around her in white coats and facemasks.

She was still completely armored, save for her helmet, which had been removed.

"Alright," a man's voice echoed, and she saw the Captain who had shown up at the Training Ground walk into the room. He was in the same white suit from before. "Take the sample."

Suddenly, Victoria looked down and saw that pieces of her armor had been removed. Two doctors with large needles loomed over her.

Before she could protest, they both jabbed her arms, and a pain unlike anything she'd ever felt **\*\*flooded\*\*** through her body, piercing any thoughts of exercising self-control or using her training to resist. She screamed.

And she woke up.

Suddenly, she was in her bed in the Spartan Barracks back at the Training Ground, as she had been for several days now. The ONI scientists, as promised, had returned her to Zulu Company within three days of, in essence, kidnapping her. She still remembered those moments, strapped down and in pain, but that was all. She'd been too heavily sedated to remember anything else.

And what was worse, because of that, she knew nothing of what they'd done to her while she was there. Why they had taken samples of her blood, what else they had done, and what had happened to Magnus were all mysteries to her.

She looked around at the rest of the team. Each of the other seven Spartans were asleep, save one, who was sitting upright and looking at her with his head slightly tilted. The usual smirk was gone from his face.

"Another one?" he asked, referring to her nightmares. They'd been occurring nightly, since she'd returned.

She nodded.

"Have you told anyone?"

"Outside of everyone in this room," she said, glancing at each of the Spartans, "no."

"You should inform the Corporal." Zeke said. "Perhaps he could make a plea with HIGHCOM to get Magnus back to us a little sooner. Maybe connect it with troubled sleep and, in turn, lessened battle efficiency."

Victoria laughed half-heartedly. "As if," she said. "HIGHCOM approved the whole thing in the first place. If the deaths of three Spartans before us weren't enough to persuade them not to approve it, I doubt bad sleeping habits will do the trick."

Ezekiel started to respond, but stopped suddenly, looking hard at the east wall, which formed a corner with the wall the door out of the barracks was located on.

Victoria focused herself, blocking out every thought in her head, and felt something. It was one of the improvements that came from her

DNA-Alteration procedure: as snakes did, she could feel the vibrations around her. Thankfully, she could still hear as well.

"You hear that?" Zeke asked.

She nodded. Whatever it was, it was heavy, and it was approaching quickly.

A moment later, they no longer had to focus to hear it. Whatever was coming toward the barracks was close enough to make a low, but constant, thunder outside.

"I think we should-"

**\*\*SLAM!\*\***

Something hit the steel door to the barracks, **\*\*hard\*\***, and rattled the very hinges on which it hung. Every Spartan was awake and out of bed in an instant. Victoria went into auto-pilot and her helmet and shields were on immediately.

"What the **\*\*Hell\*\*** was that?"

**\*\*SLAM!\*\***

The door shook again as bolts threatened to shoot from its sides.

A second later, Victoria felt the same vibrations from earlier, outside the east wall. They sounded close.

**\*\*Too close,\*\*** she thought.

SLAM!

She opened her mouth to speak, to warn the others, when the near-ancient wall seemed to explode, throwing up smoke and sending pieces of it in all directions as a large machine charged through.

What happened next was nearly impossible for Victoria, or any Spartan, to follow. As the roughly Warthog-sized craft came through the wall, blasting straight for Samuel, Christopher charged him from the right like a linebacker, throwing him to the side just in time to dodge the two huge blades mounted on the front of the vehicle.

Unfortunately, even as a Spartan, Chris didn't have enough momentum to propel him through Samuel and out of the way. Victoria could only watch in horror as two huge, spiked wheels impaled him and smashed him into the far wall.

For a few seconds, the Brute driving the craft laughed in its alien tongue as the spikes dug deeper and deeper into the Spartan, **\*\*shredding\*\*** his legs, abdomen, and even his upper-chest and splashing his blood all over the barracks.

**\*\*SLAM!\*\***

The door rattled more violently than ever as the Brute piloting the



vehicle finally began to turn, leaving Christopher's body to fall to the floor in a heap. Before the alien could leave, however, Samuel had recovered, and was the first to react to the threat, jumping the vehicle from the side and punching the Brute hard in its face, knocking it from its craft and straight into the wall.

A second later, as Jason and Landon tended to Christopher, Zeke, Stephanie and Blaine watched the door, and Samuel left the Covenant vehicle to finish the Brute. The eight-foot alien bent its neck to look up at the armored Spartan staring it down and, before it could even **\*\*reach\*\*** for the weapon on its thigh, Samuel had lifted it up by the neck, and crushed its windpipe with one hand.

"Guys," Jason's voice echoed in their helmets, sad and heavy, "Chris is gone."

Samuel breathed heavily as he dropped the carcass to the floor, and Victoria knew that, while he'd never show it, their leader was both seething and hurting beneath the armor.

"Samuel," she said, setting up a channel and glancing back toward the door, which hadn't been disturbed for several moments. "You need to focus. I know it's--"

**\*\*SLAM!\*\***

This time, the door came loose from its hinges, flying at over fifty miles per hour into the far wall and **\*\*barely\*\*** missing Victoria on its way. She turned around, and froze.

There, in the doorway, were three Brutes: two Brute Minors, armed with dual-Spikers, and one Brute Chieftain, clad in red and black armor, wielding an enormous Gravity Hammer.

\* \* \*

>Blaine was the first to respond: unarmed, he picked up one of the many bunk-beds and **<strong>flung</strong>** it at the doorway like a Frisbee, where it crashed into one of the Brute Minors, sending the alien back into the hallway. Impressed, he picked up another, spun once, and let go, letting it fly toward the Chieftain.

And then, everything went to Hell.

The Chieftain smashed the Gravity Hammer into the ground in front of it, creating a sphere of altered gravity that sent second bunk-bed **\*\*crashing\*\*** into Stephanie, who'd been charging from the left. The same sphere hit Ezekiel as he came from the right, trying to impale the Brute with one of the blades on his elbows. He was tossed like a rag-doll into the far wall.

At that moment, the other Brute charged forward, both Spikers blazing, firing dozens of the pointed needles at the Spartans. Blaine grabbed another bed to use as a shield as Jason and Landon used their arm-shields to block for both Victoria and Samuel.

Next, when the Brute paused to reload, the Chieftain charged, raising the hammer until it grazed the ceiling. Blaine watched the alien go straight for Victoria.

Suddenly, Magnus' voice sounded in his ears. \_You \_\_\*\*promised,\*\*\_ it said.

Blaine scowled under his breath and pulled the bed back behind him. He reared back for a throw, but the second he released, the Brute Chieftain changed: it began to glow, and then was surrounded in shining bands. Blaine paused, baffled, and then flung the bed anyway.

The twin bunks crashed into the alien, breaking and splintering wood all around. The alien paused, **\*\*completely\*\*** unfazed. It looked directly at Blaine, still surrounded in glowing bands.

"Hey! Ugly!" Samuel said, unloading the Spiker he'd no-doubt found on the Brute that had crashed through the wall only moments before. The spikes hit the Brute Chieftain and dug into its armor, but the beast remained unharmed, completely ignoring Samuel as it raised the hammer once more and charged Blaine.

\_\*\*What the Hell?\*\*\_ He thought, looking around for any sort of cover from the enormous hammer. With no weapons nearby, he grabbed yet another bed threw it at the charging alien. It hit and broke, but the beast kept coming, still immune.

"Damn it!" Blaine said, backing up until his back was to the wall. He glanced over to see Victoria dealing with the Brute Minors in the hallway, and then watched as Ezekiel tried to strike the Chieftain in the back with the blade on his right arm.

The smaller Spartan pulled his elbow to his chin as he jumped up and came down on the alien. As he did so, the blade on his arm began to glow, and got brighter until it was surrounded by plasma, glowing like the Elites' Energy Swords.

He stabbed the creature in the back, and it turned just long enough to smash its arm into his stomach, sending him rolling across the floor.

Before the Brute could even blink, Samuel was on him again with the Spiker, hitting it with the curved blade on the bottom of the weapon with one hand and punching it with the other. The Gravity Hammer hit the floor in front of Samuel's feet, and the enormous Spartan was sent careening through multiple bunk-beds before coming to a stop.

And then, as the single-minded alien resumed its charge, it stopped glowing. The white bands ceased to consume it, and it returned to its normal color.

\_\*\*Just\*\*\_ in time to hit me with that \_\_\*\*damned\*\*\_ hammer, Blaine thought as it closed the gap, raising the hammer for a final time.

Blaine took a knee, putting his biomechanical arms above his head, palms-up, in an effort to block the majority of the shot from the Gravity Hammer. He **\*\*knew\*\*** it was futile: his arms **\*\*might\*\*** be able to stop the strike from crushing him, but the force behind the hammer alone would be enough to absolutely **\*\*shatter\*\*** them.

He gritted his teeth as the Brute leapt into the air, landing only a

few feet from him and swinging the hammer straight down. Blaine braced himself for the hit, but it never cameâ€|at least, not really. He heard and **\*\*felt\*\*** the hammer hit **\*\*something\*\***, but it wasn't his arms. The spherical field it produced touched his palms, sending them down toward him with all the force of a Warthog behind them.

Blaine glanced up to see Jason standing in front of him. His knees were bent, and his boots were dug almost a **\*\*foot\*\*** into the flooring. He was bent backwards and, above his head, he had his arms bent, the two circular shields they produced both parallel to the ground and glowing a dull red.

The Brute had apparently stumbled backwards, because it was regaining its balance and rearing back for another strike when it let out an agonizing cry and fell to the ground, coughing up blood. Victoria was behind it, with her fists up to her face and the blades on her arms facing forward, glowing blue-white.

"Sorry it took so long," she said. She glanced down to the Brute and picked up the Gravity Hammer. "Here."

Blaine stood up as Jason stepped away, stretching his arms, and grabbed the hammer from her.

"Iâ€|**\*\*hate\*\***â€|Gravity Hammers," Zeke growled as he walked up behind her, not carrying a weapon but with two Spike Grenades fastened to his thighs. Samuel walked over, handing out four of the Brute Spikers to Victoria, Jason, Landon, and Stephanie, while keeping the fifth one.

All at once, the seven Spartans glanced at the far wall, where one of their own lay dead on the floor, in a still-growing pool of his own blood.

Samuel's voice came first. "One of the best," he said. "A Spartan," he paused, breathing heavily again. "And he saved my life."

"Funeral's gonna have to wait." Zeke said. Blaine agreed, though he wouldn't have voiced it quite so quickly. "We've got more coming." He pointed outside, through the large hole in the wall.

Against the night sky and in the sands, purple-white lights could be seen moving rapidly, and alien hollers and shouts could be faintly heard over the whine of Covenant anti-gravity systems.

With what might as well have been an entire Covenant **\*\*armada\*\*** barreling down on Zulu Company, Blaine smiled behind his visor.

"Time for a little payback," he said.

\* \* \*

>General Malone barricaded the steel door to his office with everything he could and fell back to the opposite wall, drawing his sidearm and pointing it at the door. Only moments before, he'd gotten word from HIGHCOM that over a <strong>dozen<strong> Covenant Phantoms had landed several miles from Zulu Training Ground several minutes before.

And then door to his 'house' had exploded as four of the big ones "Brutes" had come charging in with their guns raised.

"How many?" the General asked into the microphone on his desk, the one linking him to an agent in HIGHCOM.

"We've got visuals of fourteen Banshees, five Ghosts, a dozen Brute Choppers, and three Brute Prowlers. In addition to that, we've got visuals on almost sixty ground-troops, made up of Brutes, Grunts, and Jackals."

Malone cursed under his breath. "Well, I'd say that calls for me to request backup," he said, waving his arms above his head in mock-surrender.

"They're on the way," the voice said. "But we have a problem: the Pelicans met heavy resistance on the way in and were forced to turn around. The Covenant appeared downright **\*\*determined\*\*** to keep them from getting to you guys."

"Well of **\*\*course\*\*** they are!" The General snapped bitterly. "Eight of the nine Spartans are **\*\*here\*\***!" He paused. "What about the Sangheili? The Elites: what about **\*\*them\*\***?"

There was silence for several seconds before the man answered. "The only commitment the Elites could make was to send in two of their Phantoms. They should arrive within the next fifteen minutes."

BOOM!

An explosion outside shook the steel door, shaking free the chair and desk attempting to barricade it shut.

"Oh no," Malone said, stumbling backwards and falling into the desk holding the microphone. It fell off and hit the ground with a thud.

"General? Are you there?"

BOOM!

A second explosion shook the door again, and before the General could move, one of the Brutes had pried it open, and four of them rushed into the room.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

The pistol shots echoed, the sounds bouncing off the walls as the Brutes came closer, two of them actually lowering their weapons as they approached the General.

One of them growled and, Malone thought, attempted a smile. "Yes," the creature growled, "food for the ride home."

The General's eyes went wide as he backed up against the wall. He brought the pistol to bear. He fired five more shots before hearing a loud 'CLICK.'

\_Empty!\_ He thought, ejecting the magazine and reaching for another. Before he could, however, one of the aliens had closed in on him, and knocked the weapon from his hands.

Malone fought desperately, but felt bones crack as the Brute tossed him mercilessly into the wall. Unable to resist, he was dragged from his office, with the Brutes commenting on the taste of human flesh the entire way back to the Phantom.

\* \* \*

>Samuel watched with the other Spartans in silence as the Covenant vehicle that had crashed into their barracks earlier came driving up to them slowly, with Landon in the driver's seat. He thought it looked like a giant motorcycle, with its large, two-part wheel in the front and a seat in the back floating due to anti-gravity technology.  
<p>That is, except for the giant spikes on the front of the vehicle and on the wheels, and the four 35-mm auto-cannons mounted in pairs on its sides.</p>

"What'd you see?" Stephanie asked as the Covenant vehicle slowed to a stop in front of them.

"I counted fourteen Banshees, three Ghosts, eight more of these things, and another vehicle I didn't even recognize. It had four Brutes in it: one on each side, one in a turret near the center of the thing, and one in the back, driving it. The thing looked a little like a damn **\*\*sled\*\***."

"That's a Prowler." Zeke said. He glanced around as every Spartan but Victoria turned to look at him. "Hey," he said defensively, "don't ask **\*\*me\*\***. I'm just the freakin' messenger. Demon's responsible for the info."

Samuel felt his mind wander slightly. \_Four Brutes in a single vehicle,\_ he thought, \_sounds like a Warthog gone bad.\_

"And this thing here," Victoria said, snapping him back to the cold night air as she pointed to the vehicle Landon was driving. "This is a Brute Chopper. The blades on the front and the spikes on the tires are meant for impaling both personnel and any vehicle smaller than a tank."

"Your AI's got the hook-up too, then?" Jason asked jokingly.

"Yeah," she said, "her name's Gael."

Zeke scoffed. "Hmm," he said, "Gael." He paused as he thought for a moment before continuing, "traces back to Celtic roots, meaning 'wild' or 'reckless.'"

Samuel watched Victoria shake her head. "Well," she snapped, "**\*\*Demon\*\***: English adjective for a **\*\*particularly\*\***-unpleasant, **\*\*tormenting\*\*** individual."

"Alright," Samuel said, stepping forward, "time for the children to get off the playground now." He looked to Landon. "What did the Armory look like?"

The other Spartan let out a half-hearted, distressed laugh. "What

does it **\*\*look\*\*** like? It **\*\*looks\*\*** like the Covenant are one step away from setting up **\*\*apartments\*\*** in the place."

"That many of them?" he asked.

Landon nodded.

"What about the Corporal?" Stephanie asked suddenly.

Samuel contemplated hitting himself. How could they have forgotten about the other Marines, or the Corporal or the General?

"We need to find them-"

"But we need weapons **\*\*first\*\***." Zeke interjected.

Samuel nodded. "Yes, I know. First: the Armory. Second: the UNSC forces still stationed here."

"What about the Covenant?" Landon asked. "I'm telling you, there're quite a few of them up there."

"Well then," he said, "let's go. We've got a **\*\*lot\*\*** of work to do."

\* \* \*

>It took ten minutes for the Spartans to reach the Armory. In the darkness, they ran quickly, undetected by all but a few Grunts, who were dispatched with little effort. <p>And then, as had become the norm for the night, things went downhill once they finally reached their goal. The Armory was crawling with Covenant soldiers. Two Brute Chieftains, a dozen Brute Captains of differing ranks, and more than twenty Brute Minors and Majors. And that's not even mentioning the Grunts and Jackals patrolling the place.<p>

"Well," Jason said jokingly, "we tried. Let's go home."

Ezekiel cracked a smile as he watched the aliens pacing back and forth outside the Armory. The joke, on some level, was right. Getting in was going to be nigh-impossible.

\_Gotta love a challenge,\_ he thought.

After a few moments, Stephanie broke the silence.

"So, how do we get in?"

Instinctively, Zeke turned to look at Samuel. The gigantic Spartan had become everyone's first choice for a planâ€|at least, if it involved the whole team.

"There are two doors into the Armory." He said, "One on the north side and another on the west side."

"So now the question becomes how to split teams."

Ezekiel watched Samuel ponder for a moment before answering. "Blaine, Victoria and Jason: you three will take the north side. Stephanie, Zeke, Landon, and I will take the west." He paused, then added

sternly, "and everyone **\*\*be careful\*\***."

Zeke acknowledged him silently, and knew that a green light was blinking in his fellow Spartan's HUD.

"So," a voice echoed in his head, "we've got the west side."

Ezekiel scowled silently. "Be **\*\*quiet\*\***," he snapped.

The AI inside his head laughed coldly. It was an irritating, forced laugh that caused Zeke's hands to clench. "Sorry," the AI called 'Demon' said, "I'll keep my **\*\*valuable\*\*** information and resources to myself then."

"You do that."

"Zeke," Samuel said, interrupting, "let's **\*\*go\*\***."

Ezekiel nodded and followed the other three Spartans around to the west wall of the building. At the door, he could make out two Brute Majors, lightly armored, a shielded Jackal, and three Grunts.

"I see a Brute Shot, two Spikers, a Covie-Carbine, two Needlers, and one mounted Plasma Cannon." Stephanie said. "So, how do we want to do this?"

Zeke took a glance upwards. The building's roof was less than sixteen feet from the ground. \_This is gonna be **\*\*too\*\***\_\_ easy,\_ he thought.

"Landon," Samuel said, "Stephanie and I are going to go in from the sides. You go with her and cover her if they start to unload." He turned to Zeke. "You're with me."

Ezekiel grinned wickedly behind his visor. "Can I make a suggestion?"

"Yes."

"That plan sounds great, but what if, instead of going with you, I have Stephanie use her **\*\*beastly\*\*** arms to toss me up to the roof, and then I'll take care of the two Majors."

Zeke watched as the other Spartans glanced up to the roof.

Samuel nodded. "Do it."

A second later, Stephanie was on one knee with her hands out in front of her. Zeke stepped onto her palms and she tossed him up effortlessly up into the air. He landed on the roof with nothing more than a barely-audible thud.

"I'm up." Zeke said. Acknowledgement lights blinked in his HUD.

He waited for several seconds for Samuel to go around the Covenant guarding the door, so that he was opposite Landon and Stephanie. After a moment, another light blinked in the corner of Zeke's vision.

"Alright," Landon's voice echoed in his ears, "here we go."

\* \* \*

>"Keep your eyes open." One blue-armored Brute Major growled.  
<p>Ninib rolled his eyes and scanned the area, spinning the Plasma Turret from side to side. Clad in his new green armor and with a fresh tank of methane, the Grunt was <strong>perfectly</strong> content to stand around and do nothing.

"Stupid Brutes," another Grunt whispered from behind him. "Me almost like it better when Elites in charge."

"Quiet!" The Brute snapped.

Ninib looked around again and was about to speak when something caught his eye. "There!" He yelled, pointing to the right. "Over there!"

"Fire!" one of the Brutes yelled.

Ninib pointed the Plasma Cannon and let loose. The gun fired dozens of streaming plasma-bolts into the shadows, melding the sand into glass and scorching the air nearby. In a second, the shadow he thought he'd seen was gone.

"You," the Captain said, pointing to the Jackal, and then to the two Grunts, "take these two and check the area." The Jackal snarled menacingly as it raised its Carbine, but otherwise made no objections.

Ninib watched as the Jackal and two of his fellow Grunts marched away to his right, until they disappeared into the shadow of the night. He was turning to survey the other side of the door when one of the Unggoy let out a shriek.

"Demon!" one of the Brutes yelled, pointing off to the left. Ninib turned, but was too frozen in fear to fire at the oncoming monster.

The 'Demon' had to be more than twice Ninib's size, even taller than the Brutes leading the Covenant squad. The monster was clad in brown armor and charging them with a Brute Spiker, which looked **\*\*puny\*\*** in its hand.

Seconds later, the second Grunt that had gone with the Jackal screamed, and Ninib knew that he was suddenly alone. These were the same "Demons" that had conquered three Phantoms **\*\*full\*\*** of Covenant soldiers.

\_We not stand a **\*\*chance!\*\***\_ He thought.

Suddenly, one of the Brutes roared in agony and fell to the ground only a few feet from Ninib. The Grunt turned to see, in addition to his bleeding commander, another Demon, clad in black, impaling the other blue-armored Brute with what looked like an Energy Sword coming out from his arm.

And then, the monster turned and started to come for him.

**\*\*No\*\***!" Ninib screamed, trying to turn the Plasma Turret.



Unfortunately, the gun was mounted in the sand and would only rotate roughly half-way toward the oncoming monstrosity.

"This one's mine!" The larger one from before said suddenly, snapping Ninib's attention over to the left as the black-armored one stopped.

"No-No-**\*\*No\*\***!" the Grunt screamed, letting go of the turret and turning to run. Unfortunately, the methane tank caused him to lose his balance and he fell down into the sand. Ninib rolled over to see the armored monster still coming closer.

Instinctively, he pulled out his Plasma Pistol and started firing. The shots hit and caused ripples in a shield on the monster's armor, but nothing more. "Someone **\*\*help\*\***!" Ninib yelled. "I'm fighting Demon!"

He fired the Plasma Pistol again and again until it overheated, but the Demon never stopped. In seconds, it reached Ninib and picked him up by his throat, knocking the pistol from his hands.

"I was wrong to shoot you." Ninib said pleadingly, trying to save himself. "I see that now."

"Uh-huh." The Demon said, nodding. "Yes, you were."

A moment later, terrifying pain filled the Grunt for a fraction of second as his neck was broken. And everything went dark.

\* \* \*

>"Alright," Landon said as the four Spartans gathered in the doorway. He dropped the Covenant Carbine and the two Needlers that he and Stephanie had taken from the Covenant soldiers at their feet. "We did it." <p>"Yes we did." Zeke said, dropping a Brute Shot and two Spikers.<p>

Samuel said nothing, but dropped a Plasma Pistol on the ground. A moment later, the gargantuan-Spartan walked a few feet away, and Landon watched as he effortlessly ripped the turret from its mount, carrying it over while holding it at waist-level.

"Not bad," Stephanie said. A second later, she brought the Brute Shot up to her chest and then secured it to her armor. She picked up one of the Needlers. "I can work with this."

Landon agreed. He reached down and picked up the other Needler and fastened it to his back. Next, he grabbed one of the Spikers.

"I'll just take the little guns." Zeke said calmly, grabbing the Plasma Pistol and the Carbine and fastening them to his armor.

Samuel, as usual, made do with what was left, taking a Spiker and the Plasma Cannon he'd just ripped from the ground. In addition, Ezekiel had tossed him two Spike Grenades to use.

"You guys all set?" He asked.

Landon nodded along with the others. "Now I just wonder how the

others are doing."

\* \* \*

>"How many?" Jason asked, glancing around one of the darkened rooms in the Armory. His group of himself, Victoria, and Blaine had <strong>mowed</strong> through the relatively-light Covenant forces outside the north entrance and were now in the "lobby" of the Armory: a small room without weapons and containing three doors, all leading to different rooms within the place.

Now, however, the resistance was **\*\*anything\*\*** but "light." Victoria had decided it best to cut the lights, in order to give the Spartans a better chance of fighting lightly-armed, and it was working so far, except that no one could find the last few aliens hiding behind desks or under tables in the room.

And now she was listening, both for sound and for vibrations. She believed there were four Covenant soldiers left in the room: a single Jackal and three Brutes of differing rank. Thankfully, none of the Brutes she'd seen were armed with Brute Shots or other explosives.

"Four," she whispered finally, answering Jason. Her HUD showed that he was on the right side of the room, carefully working his way up with a Brute Spiker out in front of him. Blaine was going through the middle, mere inches from picking up the tables and winging them across the room as he had done the beds earlier.

And that left Victoria to take the left side. She didn't mind; she just didn't think that either of the Brutes were on her side, and it disappointed her.

Suddenly, her altered senses picked up on vibrations directly in front of her.

"Got you," she thought, feeling them grow stronger. She pulled a Spike Grenade from her waist that she'd taken from one of the Brutes they'd killed on the way in.

She stepped closer and, just before she reached the table, she heard something bounce out onto the floor in the center of the room. Automatically assuming the worst, she dove for cover away from the possible-grenade. Instead of an explosion, however, there was strange, electrical sound and, a second later, a bright light consumed the room and blinded her.

"What the **\*\*Hell\*\***?" She snapped, falling into a table and working to keep her balance. Before she could move, however, she felt something ram her from the side, knocking her hard into the steel wall to her left. As her shields beeped and whined loudly, she felt footsteps coming at her again and dove left, hearing and feeling whatever Brute had hit her smash into the wall.

There was a loud thud as the alien fell to the ground.

In a second, her vision began to clear, and she could make out the vague details of the room again. Out of the corner of her eye, she made out three shadowy shapes moving slowly against the far wall.

"Jason," she said, "you've got company."

A green light blinked once in her HUD as she used the blade on her elbow to impale the fallen Brute on the ground in front of her. Victoria, not one to take chances, stabbed the creature again, in the neck.

Before she could move to help the other Spartan, she felt more footsteps as one of the Brutes charged Jason, and his shield was up in a second. A bright blue circle of light appeared and cast shadows on the two Brutes and the Jackal in the room. As one of the Brutes ran head-first into the shield, Jason took a knee and angled the top of it toward him, effectively launching the Brute over his head and into the tables behind him. As the creature flew over his head, he primed a Spike Grenade and impaled the Brute with it.

The second Brute let out a roar, but was silenced in seconds as Blaine snuck up behind it and smashed its vertebrae with the enormous Gravity Hammer he'd taken from the Chieftain. The Jackal hissed loudly, holding its shield high above its head, but was also quickly quieted as Jason's foot smashed down through the shield and the alien lizard's entire body, breaking every bone in its path.

"Let's go." Blaine said, quickly dishing out weapons and moving Victoria and Jason toward the door on the right side of the room from where they'd come in.

Silently, he opened the door and rays of light streamed through. Victoria was suddenly glad she had only cut the lights in one room.

"Get your asses in here." Landon's voice echoed in their helmets, and the door opened the rest of the way. Zeke was there, holding it.

"Come on," he said, tossing Victoria a Shotgun. "The night's still young."

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: Like I said, I'm sorry this chapter's not as long as usual, but I looked forward through this little "segment," and I decided this would be a good place to pause. I've got this "Attack On Zulu Company" segment pretty much thought out, but I'm working on little scenes here and there. I apologize that I had less vehicles in this chapter than I said I would: I forgot how long this segment would end up. However, as you saw, there are a LOT of vehicles hovering around, and I will get to them soon. Thanks very much for reading, and I hope you'll take a minute to review and tell me what you think. Thank you!<strong>

\*\*Final Note: Also, I just remembered: I also used a couple of quotes in this chapter that came from Grunts in the Halo games. I'm thinking of doing this occasionally, as it adds a little humor to the chapter. So, if you THINK you see something from a Covenant soldier (or a Marine) that sounds familiar...you might be right. Just a side-note.\*\*

## 23. Chapter 22: Waging War

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Well, it's been a little while (sorry for that), but I finally got the next one ready to go. It's my longest yet (9,300 words, approx.), and I think everyone will find something they like. I don't like it as much as I did "Lights Out," but, overall...well, how about I just let you all tell me your opinions. First, though, we have Reviews:\*\*

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** lol, yay for alien death! Amen to that. Thanks!\*\*

**\*\*Lord of the Trees:** Yeah...I lost a Spartan in the mix. As for your questions: One, yes, Magnus will be back, but don't hold your breath. I've got plans worked out. And two, no, Victoria hasn't had any major changes made. Her little "trip" will mean something later...way later. Thanks for the review!\*\*

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian:** Well, I know you wanted something from the Armory. I'm sticking to..."simple" warfare for now. We'll have bombs later, promise. Hope you like!\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** lol, thanks for the input. I'd let you know the verdict, but I'd rather not post future plans for the whole viewing network to see...ya know? Tell me what you think of this one! Thanks.\*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** Oh yeah, they learned something alright. They're about to learn a bit more, too... Thanks a lot for your review!\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Thanks for the compliment! lol, and I'm glad you liked the scene with the Grunt. I'll have a few before the story's up. As for Magnus...sorry, it'll be a little while. For now, try and enjoy the seven I've still got running around! Thanks for reading!\*\*

**\*\*Trueshot159:** Hey, I got your comment and I like the idea you presented. I don't know who I might stick it on (if I use it...I'm trying to see how it fits with the plot as kind of a permanent "secondary" weapon). If I get to it thought, I can see it making a nice anti-Flood weapon. Thanks a lot for your compliment and your review! \*\*

**\*\*Gormanuyai:** Yeah...I'm gonna come clean right away: very much rushed. Sorry for that. I promise, I won't be doing that again. With Thanksgiving and everything else, I didn't have the time, and I rushed considerably to get it out. As for Victoria and taking chances...I meant taking chances like letting the Brute LIVE, not taking chances like involving her risking her life. These are slightly different circumstances, lol. As for the AI's...we talked about this earlier. ;) \*\*

**\*\*1 way ticket:** Yes...Chris is gone. Sorry. Blaine and Zeke always rock, lol. Hey, see you soon!\*\*

**\*\*Now,** with all those taken care of and everything addressed, it's time to wage a little war. Ever wonder what a handful of Spartans could do with an Armory full of weapons and a hoard of Covenant soldiers?\*\*

\*\*

\* \* \*

><strong>

\*\*Chapter 22:\*\*

\*\* - Waging War - \*\*

\*\*0700 Hours - December 28, 2552\*\*

\*\*Zulu Training Ground, Zulu Armory\*\*

"Everyone get a gun or two and be ready to go. Get something close-quarters, but other than that, I don't care as long as it feels right." Samuel said, rushing the other Spartans to arm themselves for the battle that he knew was quickly approaching. He didn't like fighting without a real gun and, now that they'd found the Armory, he was Hell-bent on **\*\*never\*\*** doing it again.

As the others ran around the room full of human-made weapons, Samuel was closely watching the door at one end of the room. It was strange, the way the Armory was built. One entrance led into the "lobby" area, which had a door on each wall. One door led to a room full of UNSC weaponry and also held a second door to the outside. That same room had an entrance leading to a second one, full of Covenant arms. Finally, this room connected to the "lobby" and also to the last of the three weapons-stations, which held all "heavy weapons," both UNSC and Covenant.

And Samuel knew all-too-well that there were probably over two-dozen more Covies in the Armory with them, or at least close by. That in mind, it was likely that one of them would come stumbling into the room anytime now.

"Alright," Blaine said, meeting the rest of the Spartans toward the middle of the room. Samuel took his eyes from the door to check them all.

As expected, they were armed to the teeth, at least, given the weapons available to them.

"How long do you think we have," Jason asked, "before the rest of the Covenant come to check on their forces in the Armory, that is?"

Samuel pondered the question for a second. Landon had seen over a dozen Covenant vehicles outside, and God only knew how many he **\*\*hadn't\*\*** seen.

"Not long," he said finally. Suddenly, he jumped into team-leader-mode. "We need to finish clearing out the Armory and the area around it." He said. Immediately, he started pointing. "Zeke and Victoria, you two have the Heavy Weapons Station. I want every alien freakshow dead and gone inâ€¦" he looked at a clock on the wall, **\*\*eight\*\*** minutes."

"Have them for you in five," Zeke said, pumping his Shotgun. A second

later, he and Victoria left through the door to the lobby-area.

Samuel looked at the rest of the group. "You two," he said, pointing at Blaine and Jason, "you've got the Covenant-style room next door. You've gotâ€|seven minutes."

Jason laughed. "Whatever Zeke can do, I can do in **\*\*half\*\*** the time, and blindfolded."

"I heard that." Ezekiel said.

"Wasn't whispering," Jason joked.

Blaine sighed. "Come on," he said, hitting Jason lightly on the back and signaling for him to follow. He walked up to the steel door at the end of the room and quietly cracked it open. They walked inside, and Jason shut the door behind him.

A moment later, Samuel could already hear the explosions and gunfire.

"Okay," he said. He looked at Stephanie and Landon. "The three of us are going to finish off whatever's still outside."

The two Spartans nodded. Stephanie put a fresh clip into her Battle Rifle.

"Alright," Landon said in unbelievably-high spirits. "Let's start this shit up."

Samuel rolled his eyes. That was Landon.

\* \* \*

>"Five minutes, huh?" The AI's voice echoed inside Ezekiel's mind proudly. <p>"Who rattled your cage?" He asked, annoyed. "'Cause it sure as Hell wasn't <strong>me<strong>." He led Victoria into the lobby and quickly checked for Covenant in the darkness.

"Oh, **\*\*come\*\* \*\*on\*\***." Demon said. "I'm just trying to be **\*\*supportive\*\***." The AI's voice was now arrogant and sarcastic.

**\*\*Look\*\***," Zeke whispered coldly, "when I want your help, I'll make it **\*\*painfully\*\*** clear to you. Until then, why don't you just turn off all of your audio programming and give me a break?"

"Zeke, you ready?" Victoria's voice rang out in his ears, instantly ending the conversation with the AI.

"Yeah," he said. He thought for a second. "Okay," he whispered, cutting the line with Victoria and speaking only to the AI. "You wanna help?"

The electronic entity made a scoffing noise. "Well, if you **\*\*need\*\*** me to."

"Oh, I do." Ezekiel said. He could almost feel the AI getting interested. "So, are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Good." He paused as Victoria cracked the door. Inside, he could make out several Covenant troops messing with weapons and others just sitting around. He nodded to the other Spartan and said two last words to the AI. "Time me."

\* \* \*

>In complete silence, Jason followed Blaine into the Covenant Weapon Station, and counted his blessings when he saw several Covenant soldiers, none of them facing the doorway. There was a single Brute Captain, three Brute Majors, and a Jackal wielding a Covenant Carbine. <p>"Let's do this." Jason said, pulling out a Spike Grenade. Blaine followed suit, and they both tossed the explosives at the Brute Majors. Each grenade hit and stuck deep in the back of one of the lesser Brutes, and the aliens exploded in a cloud of sizzling spikes.<p>

As the rest of the aliens turned, shocked, Blaine primed a Fragmentation Grenade and tossed it at the feet of the Brute Captain. Shrapnel flew in all directions, draining the beast's Power Armor almost to nothing as the two Spartans rushed in, Shotguns raised.

Jason fired first, completely shattering whatever was left of the alien's shields, and jumped out of the way as it started firing back with the Covenant Carbine in its hands. A few of the shots connected with his shields, and the alarm went off in response, beeping loudly.

Before the Brute could do any real damage, however, Blaine pumped four shots into its body from his 8-gauge Shotgun, blasting entire organs out of its ugly hide before stopping to reload.

Jason stood up, but ducked right back down, barely dodging a half-dozen shots from a Covenant Carbine the Jackal was carrying. A second later, with his shield better than halfway recharged, he was on his feet and grabbed a handful of Plasma Grenades from a crate next to him. He primed one, stuck it back into his hand on top of the two others, and threw them right at the alien lizard.

The explosives scattered slightly in the air, landing all around his target. As expected, the Jackal leapt away from the primed grenade, but the device's explosion triggered the others, and the Covenant soldier was engulfed in plasma.

When the smoke cleared, a corner of the room was charred black and covered in alien blood and tissue.

Jason looked around the rest of the room, taking just a second to survey what was left.

Now, with the Jackal gone, Blaine was finishing the last of the Brutes. The alien creature was armed only with a single Spiker, and Jason knew it didn't have dog's chance in Hell. After seeing its comrades slaughtered, the Brute had gone berserk, and was lowering its weapon as it prepared to charge the half-mechanical Spartan.

Blaine, as was typical, hunched over and met the charging behemoth head-on. It jumped up and came down with both arms in an attempt to crush him, and he simply let the shots connect, putting his shields on the fritz, but also letting him snatch the alien up by the neck and hold it two feet off the ground. A second later, he slammed the beast onto its back on the ground and used his foot to smash its chest-cavity.

"I'm disappointed," Jason said. Blaine turned toward him. "You didn't even use the hammer." He motioned to the huge Gravity Hammer still on the Spartan's back.

Blaine shrugged. The motion looked strange and exaggerated with his bulky armor. "What can I say?" He said, looking around the room at the fallen alien soldiers. "I don't need it."

Jason laughed. "We're just **that** good."

\* \* \*

>Victoria saw eleven Covenant soldiers inside the Heavy Weapons Station. <p><em>Three Captains,<em> she thought, looking at two blue-armored Brutes with horned helmets and single gold-armored beast. She glanced around at the rest of them, thinking, four Grunts, a Jackal, and two Brute Minors. The Spartan had to work to keep from laughing.

It was pathetic.

"I think we've got this one." She said to Zeke. The other Spartan said nothing for a bit, and started to speak when another Brute stepped out from behind a huge gun-cabinet.

This one was completely covered in highly-ornamental gold and bronze armor and with a strange, two-horned headdress.

And it was holding a Fuel Rod Gun on its shoulder.

"I call that one." Zeke said suddenly.

Victoria rolled her eyes. Boys, she thought. "Fine, he's all yours." She waited for a second before counting slowly and quietly. Oneâ€|twoâ€|three!\_

Without a word, she ran into the room with her Shotgun raised, Ezekiel right on her heels. The Covenant in the room went into chaos, with the Grunts panicking and the Brutes trying to keep the smaller soldiers in check.

"Flee!" One of the Grunts screamed as it ran for the nearest door. Soon, the others were scattered in all directions before all running for the door.

Victoria paid them no heed. Worst-case scenario: they reached the door, got through, and met Blaine and Jason on the other side.

Go ahead, she thought, run \_\_\*\*straight\*\*\_\_ for the door.\_

She charged the nearest Brute â€" the gold-armored Captain â€" and



leveled the Shotgun. The alien turned toward her, hefting up a Brute Shot, but found that, in two shots, the left side of its abdomen was missing, replaced with a gaping, bleeding hole. Victoria racked the pump for a third time.

The Brute raised the Brute Shot, clipping Victoria and damaging her shields. It raised the weapon high in the air, threatening to bring the huge bayonet back down on the Spartan's head.

Victoria could only smile. As the beast threw its arms down in an effort to impale her, she primed a Spike Grenade and lodged it into the bleeding cavity that used to be the creature's stomach. She jumped to the right as the grenade exploded, sending superheated spikes flying in all directions, shredding the Covenant soldier to ribbons and attracting the attention of every other alien in the room.

"Demon!" a deep, alien voice erupted from behind her. Victoria turned to see one of the blue-armored Captains and both Brute Minors closing in on her. The Captain was in the center while the other two were spreading out, attempting to flank her.

"Joy," she said sarcastically, quickly reloading the Shotgun. She was going to need every shot.

"Now, you **\*\*die\*\***, Demon." The Captain said as it leveled a Brute Shot in her direction. Early on in their training, the Spartans had learned just how dangerous all explosive weapons were, and the Brute Shot was no exception. The inaccurate, awkward grenade launcher was still a real **\*\*beast\*\*** to go up against.

Victoria nervously glanced back and forth and watched as both of the Brute Minors pulled a Spike Grenade from their armor. The one on her left lifted up the explosive as its eyes narrowed.

A second later, her shields beeped as a small, green beam of plasma connected with her shoulder from the far side of the room. She looked to see the Jackal from earlier, sheltered in the corner and firing at her with its Carbine.

\_Great,\_ she thought, wondering how she could possibly get away as her shields were hit several more times, \_I'm pinned.\_

Suddenly, as she turned back, the Brute that had primed an explosive let out a pained roar as a blue-white blade emerged from its stomach. A second later, Ezekiel spun around from behind it and buried the blade on his other arm into its chest. The Brute roared and swung the grenade at him like a spiked club, but he ducked, grabbed its arm, and thrust one end of the explosive into the now-open wound below its neck.

"Sorry," he said to Victoria, ducking away as the device exploded, tearing the alien apart much like the explosive she'd used had done. "Was that one yours?" Victoria could almost see the cocky smirk plastered on his face.

"Well," she started, staring down the remaining two Brutes, but stopped when she saw another blue-armored Captain aim its Brute Shot at Ezekiel from across the room. "Zeke," she yelled, "hit the dirt!"

Without question, the other Spartan literally fell to the ground on his hands. A fraction of a second later, two grenades whistled by, not a foot above his back.

"Freakin' Brute!" he yelled, looking over as he jumped up, "I said to wait your turn!"

\* \* \*

>Still nervous from having a pair of highly-explosive grenades launched over him, Ezekiel took off for the Captain, pulling out a pair of M6C "Magnum" Pistols he'd found in the UNSC Weapon Station. He remembered that someone had told him, once, that these were the "new breed" of pistol and were just as dangerous in the hands of an experienced soldier. <p>Now, looking at the two weapons in his hands, he had to wonder. They had no scope, no real 'bulk' to speak of, and really looked pathetic compared to the M6D version he was used to using. Hell, even the M6G at least felt like it had some kick to it.<p>

Three more grenades flew by him, and Ezekiel started firing both Magnums at the Captain. The bullets hit the shield and appeared to do little, if **\*\*any\*\***, damage at all.

"Damn it!" He yelled, firing until the clips were empty. He silently cursed the puny, pointless guns as he dropped them to the floor and leveled his Shotgun. A second later, he was twenty feet from the Brute.

The alien fired one last grenade before reloading, and Ezekiel saw his opening. He fired the Shotgun twice as he got closer. Neither shot was close enough to do major damage, but they slowed down the Brute's reload and gave Zeke the time he needed.

Once he was only ten feet from the alien, he flexed his legs and leapt into the air, shooting straight down at the alien twice more before hitting the ground solidly several feet behind it. He grinned, sincerely surprised. Even **\*\*he\*\*** hadn't thought that he would make such a jump, and so easily.

The Captain turned, puzzled, but Zeke didn't give it a chance to recover. He primed a Spike Grenade and threw it as hard as he could, burying it in the side of the alien's chest as it finished turning around.

The blue-armored beast flailed around and tried desperately to pull the explosive out, but was consumed in a hail of heated spikes a second later, just as the others had been.

\_Wow,\_ he thought, \_that was too-\_

BOOM!

Something smashed into his back and exploded, hitting him like a freight-train, and sent him rolling across the floor with his shields beeping loudly.

"What the Hell was-"

BOOM!

A second explosion hit the wall just above him, and Ezekiel turned to see the decorated Brute Chieftain reloading the Fuel Rod Gun.

"Come **\*\*on\*\***!" Zeke yelled, baffled. "I just **\*\*stuck\*\*** you, not **\*\*two\*\*** minutes ago!" He recalled perfectly tossing a Spike Grenade at the Brute from point-blank range. \_There's no **\*\*way\*\***\_ I missed,\_ he thought.

Zeke stood up as his shields recharged and made a run for the Brute.

The Chieftain laughed proudly as another three large, green bolts of exploding plasma erupted from the head of the cannon, each one **\*\*barely\*\*** missing Ezekiel as he closed ground. When he was close enough, he smirked proudly and made the same jump he'd made only moments beforeâ€|

And felt another ball of green plasma blast into his chest from point-blank range as the alien simply raised its gun at an angle and fired twice.

The shot caused Zeke to hit the ceiling, bounce off, roll across the floor, and come to rest at the far wall, dazed and with a terrible pain in his head. Slowly, painfully, he tried to pick himself up.

\_Damn it all,\_ he thought, cursing the promise he'd made to Magnus. Before, he might've actually **\*\*let\*\*** Victoria take on the Chieftain, but, with his promise to the enormous Spartan, he somehow found himself worried that she would find herself on the receiving end of the Fuel Rod Gunâ€|

â€|**\*\*Just\*\*** as he had.

"Freakin' alien," Zeke snapped as he forced the pain away and stood up. He looked over to see that the Brute was still reloading its weapon.

"You okay?" A deep, semi-worried voice echoed in his head. Zeke was stunned to hear slight concern in the AI's voice, but refused to let it show.

**\*\*Fine\*\***," he growled bitterly. A second later, he heard Victoria yell out and risked a glance away from the gold-armored Chieftain.

And he almost couldn't believe it.

Victoria had her knee raised and pushed forward, impaling one Brute with the plasma-covered blade coming from her leg. At the same time, while the creature was doubled-over, she had her right arm bent and was stabbing it in the back with the blade mounted to her elbow. And, somehow, the blue-armored Brute Captain was already lying dead on the floor.

BOOM!

Green plasma splashed across the wall right beside him, and Ezekiel

turned to see that the Chieftain was back to playing with his own toys, firing almost a half-dozen balls of plasma his way.

\_I take it back,\_ Zeke thought, bracing himself and then taking off at a dead sprint for the Chieftain, \_I'm not \_\_\*\*fond\*\*\_\_ of Gravity Hammers. I \_\_\*\*hate\*\*\_\_ Fuel Rod Guns.\_

\* \* \*

><p><p>

"Samuel, I see three more." Stephanie said into her helmet. She was outside the Armory, on the south side, looking for any more Covenant soldiers that could be stationed around the building. So far, she, Landon, and Samuel had killed fourteen of the alien troops, including one hammer-wielding Chieftain.

It was shocking how much easier everything was when the Spartans were armed to the teeth with Shotguns, Frag Grenades, Pistols, and Battle Rifles. The poor Brute hadn't even gotten close.

"Which kinds are you looking at, Steph?" Samuel answered.

"Nothing much," she said, looking at the three aliens, "just two sleeping Grunts and a Jackal."

"This sucks!" Landon's voice suddenly interrupted. "I ain't found a damned alien out here yet."

"Aw," Stephanie made a fake pouting sound, "I'm sorry. You want one of mine?" She inched closer to the Covenant stationed twenty yards from her.

"Kiss my biomechanical-"

Stephanie laughed. "Guess that's a no." She terminated the connection and took several steps toward the aliens.

Stephanie pulled out her Battle Rifle without a sound and slowly, carefully raised it to her chest. She knew plenty about each of the Covenant ranks. The Grunts, even if they somehow woke up, wouldn't be a problem. It was the Jackal, the lizard-like alien with senses of smell and sight rivaling hersâ€|that would be shooting back. Even so, a lone Jackal wasn't going to hold its own.

CRACK!

A gunshot rang out across the night, somewhere behind her. She never turned, but the Jackal did, and its alien-eyes immediately focused in on her.

She heard the overgrown lizard hiss from more than ten yards away as the Grunts awakened and saw her as well, going into a panic.

Before Stephanie could even bring the Battle Rifle to bear, the Jackal had raised its own weapon, which wasn't the Carbine she'd expected to see, and hissed loudly once more. There was a strange sound as the gun fired at her a purple-white beam of energy. The shot was rushed, however, and the beam connected with the Spartan's thigh, completely draining her shields and punching a hole in her

armor.

Stephanie yelled, but fought the urge to clutch her wounded leg and threw herself on the ground as the rifle fired again, sending another beam \*\*inches\*\* above where her chest had just been.

"Stephanie!" Samuel's voice rang out in her helmet, but she ignored him.

She looked up to see that it was smoking at the end closest to her, and immediately pulled up the Battle Rifle and pulled the trigger three times, sending a total of nine bullets in the direction of the Covenant sniper. At least one connected with the alien's head, and the Jackal fell into the sand, its blood staining it purple.

As her shields recharged, Stephanie picked off the two Grunts from a distance as they ran away from her, and the Armory.

"Stephanie!" This time it was Landon's voice.

"I'm okay." She breathed, clutching her leg. "I just found a sniper. Watch yourselves."

There was silence for several seconds.

"But you're okay?" Samuel asked.

She smiled. "Yes," she said, "I'm fine. Just a scratch."

\* \* \*

>Blaine was busy organizing the Covenant weapons that had been scattered when he heard the door to the Heavy Weapons Station open and slam shut. He looked up to see four very frightened Grunts with their backs to the door, breathing heavily. <p>One of them looked up, and promptly screamed. The others immediately looked up and Blaine could hear Jason laughing in his helmet.<p>

"Big scary thing!" one of them yelled, "run away!" The Grunt was looking right at Blaine and turned around, only to see Jason six feet away. It shrieked again.

"He's everywhere!" Another of the frantic aliens cried out. A second later, they all scattered, running in circles around the room.

Blaine couldn't help it. He cracked a smile and worked to keep from laughing behind his visor. This was hilarious.

CRACK!

Jason's Magnum fired a single round, putting a hole in a Grunt's head. It fell to the ground, and the others stopped running and started screaming obscenities.

"Take off suit, get on knees. Then we see who's tough!" A red-armored alien screamed, drawing its Plasma Pistol. Blaine primed a Plasma Grenade from one of the crates and tossed it casually onto the creature's back.

In perfect idiocy, the glowing blue Grunt ran straight for one of its brethren, screaming "No!" as it got closer and closer. It detonated mere inches from its fellow alien.

"And then," Jason said, staring the last one down, "there was one."

The final, red-armored Grunt yelled in fear and actually ran back to the door it had originally come from. Just as it reached for the handle, Blaine picked it up by the back of its methane tank.

"And what were you running from?" He asked as the creature trembled in fear.

The Grunt only pointed at the door.

Blaine shrugged and clenched the methane tank, ripping a hole in the top and causing it to leak liquid and gas out into the room. He pulled out his other Fragmentation Grenade, primed it, and stuck it in the creature's tank before throwing it into the wall. There was an alien scream, an explosion, and then nothing.

"That's the room Zeke and Victoria are supposed to be clearing." Jason said suddenly, looking at the door. Blaine nodded.

"You think they want any help?"

"I don't care if they do or not." Jason said. "Their five minutes is up."

\* \* \*

>Victoria dove behind a gun-cabinet, grabbing her left arm and waiting for her shields to recharge. She couldn't believe it. She'd beaten the Brutes without much of a problem, and now one damned Jackal had reduced her shields to nothing and shot her three times more with the Carbine before she could get behind any cover. <p>And she had nothing but a Shotgun to engage the creature with. At point-blank, that would've been fine, but with the alien lizard almost thirty feet away, it simply wasn't going to cut it.<p>

Victoria glanced out from behind her cover to see that Ezekiel was still trying to fight with the Brute Chieftain. By now, he was out of ammunition, and was simply trying to get close enough to impale the alien. She watched as he picked up a Spike Grenade and flung it at the Covenant soldier.

Expectedly, the Brute only laughed as it ducked out of the explosive's path and fired again, sending another flash of green energy toward the Spartan.

Suddenly, Victoria heard a door open, and the Jackal hissed angrily for a moment. She heard the sound of Plasma Rifles being fired, and the Jackal was silent.

"Who's here?" she asked into her helmet.

A moment later, Blaine's voice answered. "It's just us." He said, "Thought you could use a little help."

"Help Zeke," she said. "I think he's out of-"

"I don't need help!" Ezekiel's voice echoed bitterly through her helmet. A second later, there was an explosion, and she watched him roll across the floor.

"How 'bout now?" Jason asked.

"\*\*Fine\*\*," he growled.

"What was that?"

"Yes."

"Yesâ€¦|\*\*what\*\*?" Jason asked, clearly enjoying himself.

"Yes, \*\*help me\*\*, damn it!"

Victoria stood up as both of the Spartans unloaded their weapons on the Chieftain from behind. Blaine was wielding two Plasma Rifles, while Jason was holding a Covenant Carbine.

Countless shots of blue plasma, along with a dozen dime-sized beams of green energy hit the Brute as it turned and fired its shoulder-held Fuel Rod Gun again and again, until the gun only clicked in response to its trying to fire. Before the Brute could reload, Ezekiel had come up behind it, jumped, and sunk the blade on his elbow down, deep into the alien's neck and spinal cord.

"That is \*\*my\*\* kill." He said. He was gasping for air as the Brute fell to the ground. "After all that, I \*\*deserve\*\* that much."

With all Covenant soldiers finally eliminated, Jason and Blaine stepped into the room, and Victoria met them in the middle. Zeke walked up soon after.

There was silence for several seconds, until Jason decided to break it. Victoria saw him looking toward Zeke. "So," he said cautiously, "tell meâ€¦|\*\*why\*\* didn't you just grab one of the Spartan Lasers from the gun-racks?"

Zeke breathed deeply, still recovering. "\*\*My\*\* bad," he said sarcastically, throwing his arms up, "something about having the Brute with the \*\*cannon\*\* between me and the guns posed a real problem for me."

"Why didn't you just jump over it?" He asked, and then motioned to Victoria. "Victoria did it before."

She laughed as Ezekiel gritted his teeth.

"I \*\*did\*\*." He said. "I wound up picking myself up off the floor." He paused for a moment before adding, "I really, \*\*really\*\* \*\*hate\*\* Fuel Rod Guns."

"Guys," Samuel's voice echoed in Victoria's head. The other Spartans heard it as well. "Have you finished in there?"

"Yeah," Blaine said. "We're done."

"Good."

"What now?" Zeke asked, having finally caught his breath.

"I want Zeke and Jason to grab rifles and as many clips as they can carry and meet me outside. Victoria and Blaine, I want you to fortify the Armory in any way you can. Set up some kind of defenses, put weapons where we can get to them, whatever. Stephanie and Landon are coming in to help you."

"Something coming, Goliath?" Jason asked.

"You could say that." Samuel said. Then he added, "oh, and Jason, Zeke, you might want to bring up a pair of Spartan Lasers." He paused for a moment. "We're in for a long day."

\* \* \*

>Jason found a steel ladder leading up to a hatch in the ceiling next to one wall in the Covenant Weapon Station. The wall was the one directly between that room and the lobby-area, which meant that the hatch at the top of the ladder was right in the center of the roof. He led Zeke to the top, where Samuel opened the hatch and they both climbed out. <p>When he stepped out, Jason could already see the sun beginning to come up, over the horizon. He turned to look at the main area of the Training Ground. There was smoke coming from two of the buildings. He could only assume that one of them was the one that had housed the Spartan barracks.<p>

"They've been burning for almost a half-hour now." Samuel said.

Out of nowhere, Jason heard a humming noise in the sky behind him, and immediately recognized it as the sound of Covenant-anti-gravity technology. The three Spartans turned around just as two green-colored Phantoms flew above them, toward the burning complex.

Jason watched them fly over, until, all at once, round after round of huge, green plasma-bolts came streaming from behind one of the only non-burning buildings: the Recovery Building. He counted over three-dozen shots as close to twenty of them hit the two Phantoms.

Seconds later, there was a whining sound as one of the Phantoms exploded in a blue haze, shattering and letting its bright green, metallic bulk fall down onto the sand.

Before he could say anything, the second Phantom suddenly followed suit, and whatever was shooting the plasma-bolts stopped abruptly.

"Holy Hell," Jason finally said. "I'm guessing that was our backup?"

Zeke scoffed, "figures."

Samuel shook his head. "That's not what I wanted the two of you up here for." He said, and then pointed to the ground at the east side of the main complex, around the Recovery Building.



Jason squinted in the fading darkness, and could faintly make out several Covenant soldiers outside the building. "What am I looking for?"

Zeke let out a quick, barely-audible gasp, and Samuel sighed. "Look further to the right," he said.

Again, Jason squinted, trying to focus and scanning the sands to the right of the Recovery Building. He was at it for several seconds before he stopped cold.

There, in the sands, were a dozen Brute Choppers, eight Ghosts, three Brute Prowlers, and more than sixty Covenant soldiers walking on foot. In addition, there were fourteen Banshees in the air above them—all coming toward the Armory.

"Well," he said calmly, "that sucks."

Samuel nodded. "I want the two of you to pick off as many of them as possible before they get here. Take out the vehicles first, if you can. Buy us some time. The rest of us are going to be fortifying this place." He paused. "If there's a single place on the Training Ground we can fight this many Covenant, it's **\*\*right here\*\***." He pointed straight down, at the roof they were standing on.

Jason nodded and heard the bolt latch in Zeke's rifle. He pulled his own from his back.

"No stealing my kills," Zeke joked, aiming his weapon as Samuel walked over to the hatch and climbed down.

"Unless you can sign your name across 'em," Jason said, bringing the rifle to bear, "they're fair game."

\* \* \*

>Landon worked in a mad dash, moving weapons around the room and away from the entrance to the UNSC Weapon Station as fast as he could. He pulled crate after crate of ammunition away and into the Covenant Weapon Station, next door. <p>Through the solid titanium walls, he could hear muffled gunshots from the two Sniper Rifles up on the roof.</p>

"Guys, how's it coming?" Zeke's voice sounded in his helmet.

"We're working on it," Landon answered as he dropped a second crate full of case-less SMGs. "I think we can have this place completely impervious to **\*\*anything\*\*** those freaks can throw at us in—about twenty minutes."

Zeke laughed over the intercom coldly. "Umm," he said, "I don't wanna burst your optimistic **\*\*bubble\*\***, but you don't **\*\*have\*\*** twenty minutes."

"How long do we have?"

"I don't know—About five," he said. Landon heard three more gunshots from the roof. "Take that back," he added, "about three."

"Got it," he said, and took off into overdrive. He found two shelves full of equipment he'd only read about before. Each section of a shelf was labeled. Landon found a section labeled "TR/9 Anti-Personnel Mine," and grabbed a pair of them. He walked over to the entrance to the Armory and stuck one on each side, activating them both as he did so.

Plain and simple, the first Covie to come through that door was in for a rude awakening.

He ran back, took two more, and put them on either side of the door to the lobby-area as well, where Stephanie and Victoria were set up with heavy weapons and boxes of grenades.

"Guys," Zeke's voice came again.

"What?" Blaine answered, sounding annoyed.

"You're going to have company soon." He paused and Landon heard another gunshot. "I hope you're about ready."

Blaine's voice echoed through the intercom as he laughed cruelly. "Tell you what," he said, "\*\*\*you\*\* just send 'em in. We'll send 'em the Hell out."

Landon took the Sniper Rifle from his back and walked back into the UNSC Weapon Station, where Blaine and Samuel were already waiting at the back of the room. He was shocked to see two large, blue half-domes of energy directly in front of them, facing the door.

Blaine just pointed and said, "Deployable Cover. It's just like the Covenant use. We can shoot through it from this side, but they can't shoot back through it." He was carrying a Sniper Rifle as well.

There were several more gunshots outside, and something outside hit the door to the Armory hard, rattling it. "Here we go." Samuel said.

\* \* \*

>Zeke fired a fourth shot from the Sniper Rifle and ejected his fifth clip from the weapon. He looked down at the roof and sighed as he picked up another. <p><em>Only three more,<em> he thought as Jason dropped an empty clip as well.

They'd done well. In the forty-plus shots they'd fired, they'd taken out the drivers of nine Brute Choppers, four Ghosts and two Prowlers, plus two-dozen ground troops. Zeke's Spartan Laser was down to two shots after taking a Prowler and two Banshees out of the mix, and he believed Jason had four shots left after blasting the other Prowler.

Unfortunately, their Sniper Rifles hadn't been able to keep up with the massive amount of troops moving in, and several of them were now less than fifty-yards from the Armory, and closing fast.

Zeke fired three more shots, and a pair of Brute Choppers stopped in

their tracks.

"Not bad," Jason said, squeezing off two shots of his own and dropping a Brute Captain charging the Armory on foot.

Ezekiel fired his fourth shot, dropping two Grunts who were standing with one right behind the other. As he ejected the empty clip and picked up one of his last two fresh ones, he glanced upwards, just in time to see the remaining twelve Banshees coming down from an insanely high altitude.

Wondered where they went, he thought, swapping the rifle for the Spartan Laser on the ground. He pointed to the Banshees and Jason swapped as well. There was a low beeping noise as the two cannons charged.

Three seconds later, they fired, and two streaming, red lasers more than a foot in diameter cut through the cockpits of two Banshees and the right wing of another. All three crafts lost altitude until they exploded in a haze of blue plasma and fell into the sand.

As the guns recharged, two of the flying crafts angled their noses downward and Zeke heard the whine of plasma-cannons. However, the smaller weapons only sounded for a few seconds before they were drowned out by the sound of two miniature explosions, emitted when the Banshees both fired their mounted Fuel Rod Cannons.

"Jason!" He yelled, seeing the green balls of energy falling straight for them. Without a word, Jason ran over to Ezekiel, motioned for him to crouch down, and put both of his arm-shields above his head.

He hated using the other Spartan as his own cover, but Ezekiel crouched down low anyway, allowing Jason to play the shield in their new game with the Covenant. The two bombs hit his shields, draining both of them entirely and denting the roof where Jason's feet were, but, otherwise, caused no damage at all.

Zeke was about to fire the Spartan Laser again when he saw the other seven crafts all swooping around for another strike at the two of them. He focused on the others, inside the Armory. "Hey, can anyone hear me?"

"Yeah," Samuel said. "What?"

"\*\*Please\*\* send us some heavy weapons." He said monotonously. "We need themâ€|\*\*right\*\* \*\*now\*\*."

Samuel sighed over the link. "Sure," he said. "Will rockets work?"

Zeke did a mock-laugh. "We have \*\*Spartan Lasers\*\*." He said, suddenly serious and annoyed. "\*\*No\*\*, rockets will \*\*not\*\* work. I need a tactical \*\*nuke\*\* up here."

"We'll see what we can send." He answered, and Zeke terminated the connection.

"What's the verdict?" Jason asked as his laser fired again, frying another of the flying alien vehicles.

Zeke just looked at him. "We're pretty well screwed." He fired the last shot in his own Spartan Laser, sending the beam right through another one of the Banshees and watching it fall to the ground.

By that time, the two Banshees that had fired on them earlier had rejoined the rest of the group, and the seven total alien aircrafts were coming around for another shot.

When the plasma turrets began to whine, Zeke scowled. "Well, if they shoot the big guns, I don't think your shield will be able to take seven of them."

He couldn't believe it when Jason only laughed, lifting up some strange, four-pronged device from beside his rifle lying on the roof.

"What's so-?"

BOOM!

One of the Banshees fired its Fuel Rod Cannon, and the blast hit the titanium roof only three meters from the Spartans. Hot plasma splashed across Ezekiel's shields as the other six all closed in.

"Samuel!" He yelled into the intercom. "Where the **\*\*Hell\*\*** is our backup?"

"On its way," he said, and Zeke suddenly heard gunshots over the connection. A second later, he heard an alien scream.

He heard several Fuel Rod Cannons firing and looked up to see all six Banshees firing at once.

\_Oh crap,\_ he thought, looking around for cover of any kind.

There was none.

Zeke was bracing himself for the shots when Jason threw down the device he'd picked up only a moment before, prongs-first, onto the roof. A second later, the four prongs spread out, and a huge, yellow-tinted, translucent bubble expanded around the two Spartans. Ezekiel could make out small, honeycomb-shaped segments all around him.

Before he could comment however, the shots from the Fuel Rod Cannons connected, hitting the bubble with the explosive force of a small bomb.

And it held.

Zeke looked around in awe as not a single bit of the plasma got through the bubble. He and Jason were completely unharmed.

"What is this thing?" He asked.

Jason laughed. "It's a Bubble Shield." He said. "It's a new piece of UNSC equipment. I saw them used once, during a video of a battle that took place between the Marines and the Brutes somewhere in South America a few days ago."

Zeke was still amazed. This bubble appeared completely impervious to, in essence, any weapon.

"It stops projectiles and explosions," Jason said, "but not vehicles or personnel. You or I could walk right through it."

A second later, Zeke watched the device begin to short out, until it suddenly exploded in a small, yellow cloud. He scowled.

"Piece of junk," he said, wondering why it had just randomly shorted out. At that moment, he remembered why they'd put the shield up in the first place and looked up, into the sky.

\_Of \_\_\*\*course,\*\*\_ he thought as he watched the Banshees swoop around for another go at the Spartans.

WHOOSH!

Zeke heard something behind him that sounded like a rocket being fired, followed by what sounded like a firework cutting through the air right above him. He watched as a small projectile zoomed through the air, impacting with one of the already-wounded Banshees and causing the craft to burst into flame and explode. At the same time, four more missiles came blasting through the sky from behind them, and another two Banshees were reduced to scrap.

Zeke and Jason turned to see Blaine standing atop the hatch, holding some kind of portable missile-launcher at waist-level with both hands.

"What in God's green Earth are those?"

Blaine laughed and raised the launcher slightly. "You know what they say," he said, "Go big or go home."

\* \* \*

>Samuel reloaded the Sniper Rifle as quickly as he could, ejecting the spent clip and inserting his last full one. Zeke and Jason had taken most of them, and he only had a grand total of sixteen shots.  
<p>But it would have to do.</p>

"How are you guys doing in the lobby?" He asked over the comm-link.

"Not too bad," Victoria said. Samuel heard a Shotgun go off, followed by an alien shriek. "There sure are a bunch of them."

"Yeah," he answered, watching the door and blasting the head nearly clean off a Brute Major that was about to come in.

A second later, the door swung open, and a Brute Chieftain marched in, carrying a Plasma Turret it had no-doubt ripped from its mount. The Brute opened fire, but before the plasma could even break through the Deployable Cover Samuel had set up, he and Landon had put several sniper-rounds through its head and its ugly skull.

"Samuel!" A voice yelled over the intercom as the beast fell backwards onto the floor. It was Stephanie.

"What is it?" He asked as he tossed the now-empty rifle aside and picked up a Fuel Rod Gun.

"We're losing ground!" She said. "We need to fall back."

Samuel gritted his teeth. This was what he'd been afraid of.

"Fine," he said, "fall back. We'll cover you."

Two green lights blinked in the corner of his vision.

"You get all that, Landon?" He asked. The other Spartan nodded. "Alright," Samuel said, "let's get them in here."

Another green light blinked.

He waited, blasting the door with the Fuel Rod Gun every time he saw an ugly, alien face. After almost twenty seconds, the door behind him burst open, and Victoria and Stephanie came barreling out, shutting the door behind them.

A second later, a muffled explosion came from the lobby that shook the entire Armory. Samuel saw Landon turn to the female Spartans.

"What'd you **\*\*do\*\***?" He asked, stunned.

Victoria shrugged as she raised a Shotgun and walked toward the entrance. "Nothing much," she said.

Stephanie brought a Fuel Rod Gun identical to Samuel's up to her shoulder and prepared to fire at the first alien to show its face.

\* \* \*

>Vattinus led his squad of Covenant soldiers carefully around the side of the Demon-infested building. He'd been asked **<strong>personally</strong>** by the Prophet to see to it that the humans hiding in their "Armory" be dealt with.

And he intended to do just that.

The Brute Chieftain turned around to make sure his whole team was still there. Sure enough, both Brute Majors, the Jackal Major, and the two Brute Bodyguards were right there with him.

He could see that the entrance to the building was open, but every soldier who entered was being slaughtered by the enemies' heavy guns. As an experienced soldier, Vattinus knew there was only one way to get through a defense that heavy.

"Grunts!" he yelled, and more than a dozen of the puny aliens that were following behind his squad came up to him. He pointed at the door. "Inside, **\*\*now\*\***!"

They started to complain, until he lifted the enormous hammer from his back and began swinging it around. "**\*\*Go\*\***!" He yelled, and they did.

There were a half-dozen green explosions as the Grunts ran inside, and each one of them was sent flying back out, but Vatinnus took his chance and ordered the rest of his squad in immediately.

The two Bodyguards led the way, throwing Incendiary Grenades at the Demons as they walked inside. The flames licked the humans' shields and ate at their boxes of ammunition, and they all seemed stunned for a moment. That second, Vatinnus pushed through and lifted the hammer.

It was a maze of gunfire. The Brutes behind him were firing a mixture of Brute Shots and Spikers while the Jackal tried futilely to pick off one of the humans with its Particle Beam Rifle. The Demons, amidst all this, were trying to reload and take cover, but were forced to retreat as Vatinnus closed the gap between them.

Suddenly, one of them, clad in dark brown armor, stood up from behind a set of steel boxes. A second later, all but that one ran through the door on the far wall and closed it behind them. Vatinnus was instantly enraged. He'd set up the perfect attack, and now they were fleeing. If they escaped, the Prophet would have his head.

"Die, Demon!" He yelled, charging the Demon.

To his surprise, the ten-foot, brown-armored human gripped the sides of a huge wooden crate and threw it at him. Vatinnus braced himself, and the box shattered, doing no real damage, but spilling its contents all over the floor of the room.

He looked down, shocked.

The box had been full of Plasma and Fragmentation Grenades—more than sixty of them.

Vatinnus looked back up at the Demon in time to see it prime its own Plasma Grenade and throw it down to the floor in front of the Brute Chieftain. A second later, he too had run into the next room.

The Brute Chieftain lost it. He yelled "no!" as he reached for the golden device on his waist that would trigger temporary invincibility and save his life. Before he could reach it, however, the grenade exploded, causing a chain-reaction that detonated every explosive in the room.

Shrapnel and plasma engulfed every soldier inside, including Vatinnus, who felt his shields and armor deteriorate in the blink of an eye. He felt his hide being punctured from all sides by sharp metal, until one of the Spike Grenades he himself was carrying detonated in the heat. Superheated spikes skewered him, and he fell to the ground, taking his last breaths before leaving for the Prophet's fabled 'Great Journey.'

\* \* \*

>"Someone hold the door!" Samuel yelled as he ran through the Covenant Weapon Station and to the far door, leading into the room that had held the Armory's heavy weapons before the Spartans had moved them. <p>Stephanie dropped her Fuel Rod Gun as she and Landon both moved for the door to the UNSC Weapon Station and pushed their bodies against it, just as an explosion from the other side rattled

the doorway and the wall around it. A second later, there was another blast, and she was putting every ounce of her mechanical-muscle into keeping the door shut.<p>

She risked a glance behind her to see that Samuel was holding the far door against similar attacks by himself, pressing his enormous frame up against the titanium doorway. Victoria was running for the ladder to the roof.

"You need to help Samuel!" Stephanie said into her helmet.

Victoria stopped as she reached the ladder. "I won't be able to help him hold it for long. We need to get Blaine and Jason down here!" A second later, she practically jumped up the ladder, disappearing from view.

Stephanie's HUD blinked red once and beeped, showing faded numbers and bars and alerting her that her mechanical parts had reached their limits.

She sighed. Being a biomechanical Spartan was an oxymoron. As a Spartan, she challenged her limits and pushed the boundaries of her body by her own nature. As a "cyborg," her limits were predetermined by her mechanical parts. In simple terms, one-hundred-percent was all she had.

The door shook again as an explosion rattled its foundations.

And one-hundred-percent's not going to be enough. She thought bitterly, furious with herself that she had nothing more to give.

"I don't know how much longer we can hold it." Landon said, straining as he held the door. Stephanie could hear in his words that he was gritting his teeth.

Another explosion detonated, and the locks on the doorway gave out. Stephanie pushed far beyond her mechanical limits, and her HUD began to blink and beep again rapidly, showing her glowing red symbols and numerals. Finally, the diagnostic AI interrupted.

"One-hundred-forty-percent of maximum output reached. System malfunction: **\*\*imminent\*\***."

She was about to speak when something hit the door like a train, blasting it from its hinges and sending both her and Landon rolling across the floor. Stephanie recovered and stood up in time to see a Brute Chieftain with a Gravity Hammer walk in, with two gold-armored Chieftains behind him, armed with Plasma Turrets.

"Samuel!" Landon yelled into their communications-link. "We've got company!"

Stephanie looked to Samuel to see him still struggling to hold the door shut against the assault from the other side. He nodded almost unnoticeably.

"Now, Demons," the red-armored Chieftain growled, raising the hammer as it closed in on the two Spartans. "Hold still."



Stephanie looked around for a weapon, but they were scattered throughout the room. There was nothing close, and certainly nothing capable of fighting with the Brute. She raised her fists in a fighting-stance.

The leading Chieftain laughed coldly as the two behind it spread out and started firing.

\* \* \*

>Jason heard another explosion as he put down the Spartan Laser. He glanced out at the sands surrounding the Armory. <p><em>Damn,<em> he thought, looking on in awe. The Spartans had eliminated almost every enemy force out there. All Banshees, Ghosts, Choppers, and Prowlers they'd seen were nothing but torn metal and broken scrap lying on the ground. The bodies of almost forty aliens who had been walking on foot were strewn about the area. Zulu Training Ground had become a graveyard.

He heard someone clambering up the ladder and turned around to watch Victoria scramble out of it, just as another explosion sounded.

"We need you guys downstairs." She said, looking to the ladder. "Stephanie, Landon, and Samuel are trying to hold the doors, but they're not going to last much longer!"

Jason grabbed the Shotgun he'd brought up with him, suddenly thankful he had.

"How many are there?" Zeke asked as he pulled the hilt of an Energy Sword from his side.

"I don't know." Victoria said. "At least-"

BOOM!

Yet another explosion echoed, and Jason felt the entire building shake.

"Let's go!" She said.

Jason nodded as Blaine set the empty Missile Launcher he'd brought up down onto the roof. The biomechanical Spartan grabbed a Rocket Launcher from his back and put it on his shoulder, trying to put in the launch assembly it as he did so. For some reason, it wouldn't fit in the launcher.

"Damnable thing," he said, cursing the launcher. "It wasn't working earlier either!"

BOOM!

There was a last, horrible explosion, and Jason heard two people yell as metal scraped metal down in the Covenant Weapon Station.

"The door gave way!" Victoria said, running to the ladder.

Before Jason could stop her, she activated an Energy Sword and jumped straight down into the building. He ran to the ladder and looked down to see her running circles around a red-armored Chieftain, who was

trying hard to hit her with its enormous hammer. At the same time, bursts of blue-white plasma were flying from one side of the room by the dozen.

"Victoria!" He yelled at her, but she didn't stop. She ran around to the front of the creature and impaled it with the sword.

The Brute brought the hammer straight down, but missed narrowly as Victoria ran around it and stabbed it in the side with the blade on her elbow. Jason could only watch as the alien let out a roar and swung its arm back, flinging her away.

"Hey!" He yelled down the ladder, shooting the Shotgun once to get the Brute's attention. It had to bend its body backwards to look up, just in time for Jason's mechanical foot to come crashing down on its skull, shattering it like a melon against the concrete.

"Glad you could make it!" Landon said, and Jason raised his two arm-shields to block the shots from two Brutes wielding Plasma Turrets. He took cover behind a cabinet and the Brutes switched targets, aiming for Samuel at the far end of the room.

Landon moved from behind cover, standing between Samuel and the two aliens and blocking the shots with his shields until they started to glow a dull red. "Jason, help!"

Without a second thought, Jason moved in and switched the other Spartan spots, now shielding both Samuel and Landon with his defensive implants. He wondered if Landon's shields would be able to recover by the time he died down.

A second later, his had already begun to lose their blue coloring, and he knew that they wouldn't.

"What's the plan, Goliath?" Landon asked from behind him. With his eyes squinted against the bright plasma, Jason could hear Samuel panting behind him as he struggled to hold the door, but nothing else.

Suddenly, as his shields turned red, Jason heard a something hit the ground hard, and looked over to the ladder to see Blaine standing with his back to the Spartans, facing the two Brutes with a Rocket Launcher on his shoulder.

"This one's for Chris, you ugly bastards!"

Before the Covenant soldiers could even switch targets, he'd unloaded both rockets from the launcher at the one closest to the door, blasting its shields and armor with the first and making it into nothing more than a pool of blood and guts with the second.

As he bent down to load another set from a crate near the ladder, the other Brute stopped firing at Jason and aimed the turret toward the new threat. Blaine was forced into cover, shields beeping, before he could grab another set of the HEAT Rockets.

"Someone kill that damned thing!" He yelled, and Jason was pushed aside as Samuel charged passed him, bringing a Fuel Rod Cannon up to his shoulder and firing five shots right at the remaining Chieftain. Green plasma flashed across the walls and floor, and the Brute was

blasted into the wall, bleeding and clutching what remained of its Power Armor.

As the gold-armored alien tried once more to aim its weapon, Samuel had already dropped the Fuel Rod Gun, closed the gap between them, and was shooting an entire clip from an Assault Rifle into its hide. Seconds later, as it leaned against the wall, Samuel finished it by bashing its head in with the butt of the rifle and stopped, panting.

Jason was about to congratulate him when he realized their mistake: Samuel had been the one holding the door. He turned around with his Shotgun raised, expecting to see a hoard of Covenant soldiers emerging.

None did.

The door was still closed.

Slowly, carefully, Jason inched to the door and opened it, letting out a sigh of relief when he saw Zeke standing in the room, arms crossed, surrounded by dead Jackals, Grunts, and two Brute Majors.

He saw Jason and looked around. "They were preoccupied with the door." He said, pointing to the bodies around him. "I killed four of them before the rest even realized I came in."

\* \* \*

>Samuel ordered the other Spartans to arm themselves with whatever was left in the Armory, including leftover grenades and ammo from any bodies they could find. As they did so, he stood guard at the entrance to the lobby, waiting. <p>"We're leaving in five minutes." He said into the intercom. "We're going to the garage, and then we're getting out of here."<p>

"â€"â€"are youâ€"â€"anyone there?" A voice echoed in his helmet, riddled with static. From what Samuel could hear, it sounded human.

"This is \*\*Spartan 025\*\* of Zulu Company," he said. "Who is this?"

The frequency cleared slightly. "Thisâ€"â€"your  
\*\*Corporal\*\*."

"Corporal!" he said. "We thought everyone was dead."

"We thought weâ€"â€"be. We're inâ€"â€"Recovery  
Builâ€"â€"."

"Recovery Building?"

"Yeah."

"How many are left?" Samuel asked, still wondering how they'd survived.

"Maybeâ€"â€"of us left."

"How many?"

"â€œâ€œDozenâ€œâ€œ"

"We're on our way, Corporal. Can you hold out?"

"â€œâ€œamn right we can. Hurry though, weâ€œâ€œmuch longer."

"We'll be there as soon as we can."

The frequency cut out.

"Spartans," Samuel said, broadcasting his voice to all six of them.  
"Change of plans."

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: And so it ends...well, at least, this chapter. Next chapter, I'm sending them to the Recovery Building for the next round with the Covenant, and an attempt at saving what remains of the UNSC forces stationed at Zulu Training Ground. Please, don't hesitate to leave me something for this one: it took a long time, and I really hope you all like it. But, regardless, I'd like to know what you all thought. Thanks for reading!<strong>

## 24. Chapter 23: Rescue

\*\*Author's Notes: Well, it's a little late, but I got it out and made sure I liked it (a little rushing, nothing major to compromise quality too much though. :) ) In addition, it has a LITTLE bit of an excuse, since this chapter, WITHOUT Author's Notes, is 11,250 words (WOO!). That is my record, and, after typing this, I hope it stays that way. wipes away gallons of sweat Now, so I can do this and then get to bed...reviews!\*\*

\*\*Reviews:\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: Hey, thanks! If you liked that last scene, let me know what you think of this one!\*\*

\*\*zned51: Hey, long time no see. I thought you'd given up on me and my story. ;) (Kiddin' ya). About the magazine thing...yeah, my bad. Should've run it by my encyclopedia first...still, it's minor, and I fixed it in this one! No clips, lol, promise. As for the detonating of explosives...we'll say they got lucky. It could happen, right? After all, they've had enough bad luck, with Chris and all. They need a break somewhere. Thanks a lot for the review!\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: Thanks a lot for the compliments! Yeah...I wanted these Spartans to be different. I wanted some semblance (sp?) of a personality, lol. So far, I really do like the way it's turning out. As for what you said about the S-II's and such...you're probably right. I wanted them to be physically superior, but less-experienced. But, don't worry...they'll get there. :) Thanks again!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Hey, thanks very much! I'm glad you like the Grunt-stuff. There's some Grunt-perspective in this one, but I'm

saving the really funny scenes this time. Just a short one. Also, to answer your questions: A lot of it will take place on Earth, but they WILL go into space toward the end. Hope this helps! Let me know if you like this one, please!\*\*

\*\*Trueshot159: Hey, thanks for the compliment. Glad you enjoyed it!\*\*

\*\*GuardianXAngel: Yep, Samuel is the head of the squad. He's the one they all turn to for ideas and semi-sane plans, lol. I'm glad you liked the last couple chapters. This next one FEELS like several chapters, lol. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: lol, glad you liked that. I got a kick out of it. It was just one of those ideas...popped into my head, and I couldn't help but use it. They're not always funny, but that's okay. Thanks for your compliment and your review!\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hola! lol. Thanks for all the compliments, my friend. Your story's coming along quite well now to, though, so I'll have to start doing this for you when you get it going. :)\*\*

\*\*TheHuntedOne: lol, here we go... ;)\*\*

\*\*A: Yay...Blaine! Amen to that. He's a beast. ;)\*\*

\*\*B: Zeke and Victoria...two Spartans with blades mounted to their arms and have a fascination with Energy Swords. Always a fun time.\*\*

\*\*C: Chapter good? Thanks! lol\*\*

\*\*D: Awww...forget about it, lol\*\*

\*\*E: Gotta love the action!\*\*

\*\*WolfyWolf: Greetings to my new reader! lol. Hey, seriously, I'm glad you like it so far. I'm always happy to have someone reading who will post and tell me what they think. It gives me a reason to try and get these out every week, if you know what I mean. Thanks very much for the compliments you gave me. I just hope you'll still feel like it after you keep reading... :)\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Yeah...a little unfocused. You might not like this one either. I tried to keep it linear, but it's kinda difficult, lol. Still, thanks for the compliment...you DID like it, then? Yes? No? Almost a little? lol\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: lol, sorry you had to be drugged. I hope that's not the reason you liked it. ;) Thanks though, and let me know what you think of this one, if you get a chance...yeah? Later.\*\*

\*\*NOW, finally, to my LONGEST CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD (sorry...it was really, really long to type, and I've lost my mind):\*\*

\*\*

\* \* \*

><strong>

**\*\*Chapter 23:\*\***

**\*\* - Rescue - \*\***

**\*\*1100 Hours - December 28, 2552\*\***

**\*\*Zulu Training Ground, Zulu Armory\*\***

Stephanie fastened the Fuel Rod Gun securely to the magnetic points on her back, reached down, and picked up the Covenant Carbine leaning against the wall. She had a total of twenty-one shots for the Fuel Rod Gun and the Carbine was full. In addition, three grenades were attached to her armor: a single Fragmentation Grenade and two Spike Grenades.

"Let's go," Samuel said as he walked into the Covenant Weapon Station. He was carrying a Shotgun in his right hand and had a Spartan Laser latched onto his back. "It's time to get the Corporal."

Stephanie saw some of the Spartans eyeing their own weapons, and each other's. She smiled behind her visor, pleased at what everyone had found. Blaine had rockets and the Gravity Hammer he'd taken from the Brute Chieftain that had attacked them in the barracks. Victoria was carrying around an Assault Rifle and had the hilt of an Energy Sword attached to her thigh.

"Hurry up," Samuel said, getting anxious. It was unusual for him. Normally, he was calm, cool, collected, and most of all, **\*\*patient\*\***. Stephanie sighed.

There wasn't much time.

"Ready when you are, Goliath." Jason said, walking into the room with a Brute Shot in his arms and a Covenant-made Particle Beam Rifle on his back. Zeke was behind him, with an AM Sniper Rifle strapped to his armor and an Energy Sword on his thigh.

"We're almost ready," Victoria said. "But where's Landon?"

Stephanie glanced back and forth. He wasn't there.

"Landon!" Samuel said into the intercom, causing his voice to echo in each of the Spartans' ears.

"I'm almost there." Landon's voice said. Stephanie raised an eyebrow. If he wasn't with them, where was he?

"What?" Samuel asked.

"Just come outside."

Stephanie watched the biggest Spartan shake his head as he led the rest of them out of the Armory, into the sands. Her eyes adjusted in seconds, and she smiled wide in her helmet.

There, outside the Armory, were three Brute Choppers and three Ghosts, all in perfect condition.

"Damn right," Jason said.

A second later, there was a humming noise as Landon came driving up to them in a Brute Prowler, parking it beside them, a foot from the wall of the Armory. It too was in almost-perfect condition.

"Where'd you get these?" Blaine asked, stepping carefully onto one of the Choppers.

"They were out in the sand," Landon said, "from where our two snipers blasted their pilots right off of them."

Stephanie noticed Samuel's demeanor changing instantly. "Alright," he said, nodding with approval. "It's time to go pay the rest of the Covenant a visit. First, we'll have-"

Victoria cut him off. "Sorry to interrupt." She said. "But I don't think it's going to be that simple."

\* \* \*

>"Gael just got a hold of some encrypted Covenant transmissions." Victoria said, explaining herself as the rest of the Spartans, minus Zeke, stared at her. "Apparently, between UNSC radio contact and the Covenant battle network chatter, she's figured out that we've got more on our hands than just a few foot-soldiers." <p>"Meaning what?" Blaine asked, twirling the enormous hammer in his hands as if it were a toy.<p>

Victoria sighed, trying to find the words to explain what Gael had just told her. If only the AI could talk to them all more easily. "The Covenant have anti-aircraft Wraiths set up in multiple areas on the Training Ground." She said. "\*\*\*That's\*\* why we've been unable to get backup, even though an order was made."

"Okay, so what?"

"Well, also, from what Gael had to-"

"They've also planted a bomb." Zeke interrupted. Victoria wasn't sure to be thankful or irritated. Incredibly, she found herself feeling both ways at once.

Samuel lowered his head to look straight at the smaller Spartans. "A bomb?" he asked.

Victoria finished before Ezekiel could. "According to the transmissions," she said, "the Covenant have planted multiple anti-matter charges throughout the area, including one right inside the Armory, in the Heavy Weapon Station. They're all set to go off inâ€|aboutâ€|"

"Forty-eight minutes," Zeke finished, "one of them here, another in the garage, a few more scattered throughout the base. The Covenant are planting another one in the Recovery Building right now, and then they're taking off via their support Phantoms, which are stationed a mile or so south of the Main Complex."

Samuel shook his head rapidly. "So, let me get this straight." He

said. "There are a bunch of Covenant bombs planted on the Training Ground, **\*\*each\*\*** of which could **\*\*easily\*\*** send this whole place up in flames. In addition to that, they're set to go off fairly soon, and we can't even **\*\*get\*\*** extraction until the anti-air guns are dealt with?"

Victoria nodded.

"Well that about **\*\*sucks\*\***." Jason said. He turned to Samuel. "What the Hell do we do now?"

The larger Spartan said nothing for a few seconds before turning to Victoria. "Is there anything else I should know?"

She shook her head.

Samuel turned to Zeke, and he did the same.

"Alright," he said. "We're splitting up." He paused, looking around. "Now, time to divvy-up the teams."

First, Samuel pointed to Jason and Landon. "You two are going to the garage." He said. "Get the **\*\*biggest\*\***, **\*\*baddest\*\*** vehicles you can find, and bring them to the Recovery Building. We're going to need them to destroy the anti-air Wraiths."

They both nodded, and then each got into a Ghost.

"Next," Samuel said, looking to Blaine. "You, Zeke and Stephanie are responsible for getting inside the Recovery Building, bringing the Marines up to the roof, and calling for extraction for all of us."

Blaine nodded and hopped onto a Chopper, revving the huge engine as the other two Spartans each followed suit.

Victoria arched her neck to look up as Samuel turned around to face her. "You're with me." He said. "I'm going to need your help giving the Covenant a little something to remember us by."

She nodded, thinking of their chances. There would be dozens of Covenant, at least fifteen support Phantoms, countless vehicles, and several Wraiths where they were going.

Victoria smiled. \_Nothing like a good challenge to get the blood flowing.\_

Samuel looked around one last time at the group. "Alright," he said. "That's everyone. Break!"

\* \* \*

>Blaine punched the boost again, causing the Brute Chopper to surge forward, getting airtime as it rocketed off a sand-dune. He glanced back to see Zeke and Stephanie close behind him, with the outlines of Jason and Landon's Ghosts barely visible far off to their right, zooming toward the garage. He might've still been able to make them out clearly, were it not for the fifteen-mile-per-hour winds that were tossing sand through the air and destroying the majority of their visibility. <p>He sighed quietly, thinking of the complicated



plan that Samuel had laid out for the rest of them. Blaine wasn't going to object, but it all seemed too complex. The plan called for Jason and Landon to get all the way to the garage, find vehicles capable of taking out a dozen Anti-Air Wraiths, and then get over to the Recovery Building, all within the span of less than an hour.<p>

As if that weren't enough, **\*\*while\*\*** they were doing it, Samuel and Victoria were taking the bomb from the Armory and planting it in one of the Phantoms, which Blaine had thought from the beginning was a ridiculous idea. Sure, it would wipe out the entire fleet of them, but it was also extremely prone to mishaps, which seemed to be occurring frequently anyway.

\_Oh well,\_ he thought. \_I suppose it's just better to trust that they know what they're doing. After all, he's on-\_

"Blaine," a female's voice echoed in his head.

"Yeah Stephanie?" he said.

"How do you wanna handle this once we get there?"

Blaine had been thinking about that. The three of them were driving Brute-made vehicles with guns and giant spikes mounted to the fronts of them. In addition, the Marines were supposed to be holding out on the bottom floor of the building, but Zeke was supposed to stay stationed on the roof for evac.

"I think we're just gonna do it the old-fashioned way." He answered. "Put your best wheel forward and go in guns-blazing." He heard Zeke laugh.

"Sounds like a plan to me."

The other Spartan's words came just as Blaine shot over another dune and was able to see the three-story Recovery Building clearly in the blowing sands. Outside, he could make out dozens of Brutes that appeared to be Minors, but had mounts on their armor different than he'd ever seen before. On the front, the armor was longer, covering their chests and stomachs, and on the back, the armor bulged, looking like some sort of metal 'pack.'

"Are those Majors or Minors?" Stephanie's voice echoed in the intercom.

"No idea," Blaine answered. "You see those things on their backs?"

"What are those th-"

Stephanie stopped abruptly as one of the Brutes jumped into the air, and the pack on its back shot fire straight down, propelling it all the way to the top of the huge Recovery Building. A second later, three of the others followed suit, jumping easily to the roof of the building.

"Well," Zeke said cynically, "I guess we know what **\*\*those\*\*** are for."

Blaine shook his head as the Chopper boosted again, roaring over the top of another dune and finally becoming visible to the Brutes. Instantly, they drew their weapons and scattered around outside the building.

Seconds later, the three Spartans were less than forty feet away from the group of almost thirty Brutes and Blaine both heard and felt Covenant Carbines and Brute Spikers being unloaded on the soldiers. The massive engine of the Chopper was directly in front of him, though, and blocked the majority of the shots.

In a matter of seconds, Blaine closed the gap and punched the boost again, causing the Chopper to launch into a group of the aliens, gutting them and destroying their bodies with its enormous wheels and spikes. He could hear the screams of more Brutes as the other Spartans ran them down.

Blaine heard Zeke laugh over the link. "Hey guys," he said as the Chopper rammed another Covenant soldier, ripping it to shreds and running it over, "ever played Frogger?"

Stephanie laughed slightly, and Blaine spun his own Chopper around to see the thirteen remaining Brutes running in all directions. He held the alien craft still and began shooting the guns mounted on its sides, blasting several of the aliens out of the skies as they tried to jump to the top of the Recovery Building.

Within a few minutes, the area was silent, and littered with the bodies of the Covenant soldiers.

"Alright," Blaine said, stepping off the Brute Chopper and walking toward the front door of the Recovery Building. As he expected, the Marines had barricaded it shut.

Stephanie and Zeke walked up beside him.

"How are you two getting in?" Zeke asked.

Blaine shrugged, looking around. There were no windows on the first story, and only a few on the second.

"Well," he said, "at least we can give Zeke a boost to get to the roof." He looked at Ezekiel. "You think, if we give you a lift, you can jump to the top?"

Zeke looked up, then back at Blaine. "That'd be **\*\*great\*\***," he said, "except that I don't know if it would work," he paused, "and I brought a little something from the Armory."

Without another word, the smaller Spartan detached a large, blue and purple device from his armor and threw it onto the ground. Instantly, three pieces of the machine bent outward, forming a base on the ground, upon which the blue, high-tech innards of the device rested and started glowing.

A second later, a blue, white, and purple beam of energy was emitted from it, extending several meters into the air. Blaine recognized it immediately.

"A Gravity Lift," he said, looking at Zeke. "They were in the

Armory?"

Zeke nodded, then flexed his legs, ran for the lift, and jumped just as he reached the beam. The combined power of his jump and the lift propelled him up, all the way onto the roof.

A second later, Stephanie followed his lead, but her typical jump wasn't nearly as high, and she flew into the second-story window Zeke had placed the lift in front of.

"You comin' in, Blaine?" She asked.

"Yes," he said monotonously. He ran up to the lift and felt a sense of vertigo as it pushed him high into the air, and he almost overshot the window. At the last second, he lost some of his vertical jump, and essentially fell into the building.

"Are you guys in?" Zeke's voice echoed in his ear.

"Yeah," Blaine said. He turned to Stephanie. "Now to get the Marines out of here."

She nodded, and he led the way down the hall of the building. It was shocking how much different the second story was from the first. Instead of there being dozens of rooms with hospital beds, the hallways seemed to interconnect like a maze, leaving only a few areas of importance: two large offices, a staircase down to the first floor, and another leading to the third floor.

Blaine was trying to decide which staircase to take when he heard someone yelling. For a moment, he wondered if it was a Spartan, but realized a second later that the voice was coming from the bottom floor.

He turned to Stephanie and hefted the Rocket Launcher. "Let's go."

\* \* \*

>The second he landed atop the building, Ezekiel ran straight for the door to the staircase that would take him down, into the third story. He'd seen several Brutes jump up to the top before the Spartans ever arrived, and they weren't on the roof now, which meant they had to have gone inside. <p>He opened the cast-iron door as quietly as he could, rounded a corner, and, sure enough, there they were. Four Jump-Pack Brutes all crowded around the door to what Zeke presumed to be an office. He smiled behind his visor.<p>

\_Here we go,\_ he thought, taking an Incendiary Grenade (a.k.a. "Firebomb Grenade") from a spot on his armor. He reared back and threw the grenade like a baseball at the unsuspecting aliens. The Brute closest to him burst into flame and the flammable liquid from the grenade spread to the others. In only a few moments, they were all running and flailing around, covered in flame.

"Fools," he said. Before they could focus on much of anything, he ran for the end of the hall and impaled two of them with the blades on his elbows. As they doubled over, he stabbed the same two blades straight down into their backs, severing their spinal cords and leaving them in burning heaps on the floor.

Next, he turned to the others. One of them was the Brute initially hit with the Firebomb and was on the floor, quickly dying. The other had pulled out its Carbine and already begun shooting. Fortunately, it was mere feet away, and Zeke grabbed the Energy Sword from his thigh.

"Too **\*\*little\*\***, too **\*\*late\*\***," he said as the blue-white blade emerged and he ran it through the creature's chest. He twisted the blade, cutting arteries, and pulled it out. The Brute fell in a bloody mess on the ground.

Zeke started to relax, but was interrupted. "Radar has picked up several more of them gathering around the building," Demon said in his head. "You might want to get back outside."

Ezekiel scowled, but quickly ran outside. He walked to one side of the roof and glanced down to see several green tanks directly below him. In the distance, the shadowy outlines of over twenty Phantoms could be seen in the sand, near the abandoned South Garage, essentially just an empty two-story building.

"Bastards are everywhere," he mumbled.

"Ezekiel," the voice in his head came again, "radar's picking up more hostiles on the other side." He didn't know why the AI was suddenly being so informative. It was **\*\*almost\*\*** as annoying as when it was sarcastic.

But, just in case, he ran to the other side of the roof and peaked out over the edge, just in time to watch two Jump-Pack Brutes skyrocket into the air above him from less than three feet away. He stumbled backwards, recovering from the shock and bringing the Sniper Rifle to bear.

"Oh **\*\*no\*\*** you don't," he growled as they started to come down from their jumps. He aimed the rifle and put a shot in one of the aliens' skulls. A second shot inflicted identical damage to the other, and they both fell back to the ground.

Two dull thuds echoed behind him as another pair of the aliens touched down, each wielding Spikers.

Zeke turned around and fired the last two shots from the magazine, killing one Brute and draining the other of its shields. "How many of you freaks are there?"

He dropped the rifle and charged the Brute, letting a few of the spikes hit his shields as he covered the gap. The alien swung its arm but hit air as he ducked low and ran the Energy Sword through its gut. It fell at his feet.

\_That's four.\_

Ezekiel hustled back to the rifle, inserted a new magazine, and spun a full circle, waiting for more of the Covenant soldiers to show their faces. When none did, he walked over to one side, looking down to see the anti-air Wraiths again. Getting a good look, he could see that they were huge, green Wraiths with multiple cannons mounted to their tops.

\_Great,\_ he thought, counting a dozen of them.

"Demon!" a deep, alien voice yelled behind him. He turned to see four more of the Brutes on the roof, this time armed with Carbines.

"Oh, come **\*\*on\*\***!" He snapped bitterly, ducking behind a several large, steel crates stacked next to him as the green beams of energy flew by.

"I **\*\*told\*\*** you there were more." Demon's electronic voice echoed in his ears.

**\*\*Shut\*\* \*\*up\*\***," he said, distracted. He brought the Sniper Rifle up and poked his head out.

CRACK!

One of the beasts fell to the ground with a gaping hole in its forehead.

CRACK!

Another's shields went to nil as the rifle's 14.5mm armor-piercing round punched a clean hole in its upper chest.

CRACK!

The same Brute was missing half its neck as it fell into a pool of crimson blood.

Zeke was about to fire again when something landed behind him with a dull 'ting' sound. He glanced back to see a Spike Grenade half-buried in the roof a foot behind him.

"Oh, **\*\*Hell\*\*** no," he said, forgetting all about the two remaining Brutes as he dove from behind the stack of crates.

The grenade exploded, sending razor-sharp, superheated spikes in all directions, a few of which pierced his shields and caused the alarm to sound. His cover tumbled, and he was left squaring off with the last of the soldiers.

"Here goes nothing." Zeke growled, dropping the rifle as he took a Frag Grenade from his armor. He reared back and flung it at the firing Brutes, causing smoke and shrapnel to ruin any line of fire they had. With their shields flickering, he raised the Energy Sword and charged again.

The Brutes had gotten closer together, until they were only two feet apart. Zeke came directly in between them and the one on his left swung its Carbine like a club, barely missing the Spartan as he twisted to the right and stabbed the alien in the stomach with his elbow-mounted blade. At the same time, he ran the Energy Sword through the chest of the other, causing them both to roar in rage.

As his shields started to recover, Zeke turned right until his back was to the aliens, and he thrust both elbows up behind him, deep into their necks. The two fell without another sound, apart from the 'thud' they made upon hitting the cold metal of the roof.

Panting, he deactivated the sword and attached the hilt to his thigh as he walked over to the side. It was then, while he was trying to catch his breath, that he almost gasped.

From the side of the roof, he could over a dozen of the Jump-Pack Brutes on the ground, all carrying seemingly-random weapons. Even from the top of the building, he could make out a pair of Fuel Rod Guns and a Particle Beam Rifle. He checked the Sniper Rifle.

\_Eight shots,\_ he thought miserably. He glanced down and saw the sword's battery read a solid 80-percent.

"Blaine, Stephanie," he spoke into the helmet, focusing on his teammates.

"What is it, Zeke?" It was Blaine. He sounded annoyed.

"How close are the two of you?"

"Just **\*\*started\*\***," he snapped, and Zeke heard the sound of a Covenant Carbine being reloaded. He almost laughed. The sound had become familiar to him in the last few minutes. "Why?"

Zeke sighed. "No reason," he said, glaring down as another four Brutes backed up for a jump to the roof. "Just do me a favor."

"What's that?"

The Brutes flew in front of him, only starting to come down when they were fifteen feet above him, and **\*\*already\*\*** shooting down at him.

Ezekiel leveled the rifle as the first of the ugly bipeds touched down. "Hurry up."

\* \* \*

>"I've died and gone to Heaven." Landon said, staring down into the canyon filled with UNSC and Covenant vehicles. Many of them were sitting empty as the Brutes wandered around, only getting in to move them from place to place. <p>Jason laughed. "No," he said, "Heaven would've been just you and those vehicles. The Covenant have beaten us <strong>to</strong> Heaven, in turn making it **\*\*Hell\*\***."

Landon sighed, defeated. Truthfully, he was right. They'd counted over twenty ground-troops wandering around, most of them high-ranking Brutes.

"So," Jason said casually, "how you wanna do this?"

Landon shook his head. He'd never seen the 'garage' before. In truth, it was more than that. The garage, from what he'd seen, was huge, and it was literally two enormous titanium doors attached to a manmade cave into a sunken canyon. The doors had opened once in the time he and Jason had been there, and he could see rows of lights inside going on for at least a quarter-mile.

Other than that, they hadn't seen even a semi-plausible way in.

"I have no idea." Landon finally said. He glanced at Jason's weapons. The other Spartan had a Brute Shot and Particle Beam Rifle, both fully-loaded. Landon himself had a Rocket Launcher and five rockets, plus a full Battle Rifle.

Also, they had the two Ghosts they were sitting quietly on top of.

"You think we've got the firepower to blast our way in?" Landon asked. Jason shook his head.

"We're outmanned and outgunned." He said. "Not to mention, we'd have to wait for those doors to open." He pointed to the huge, forty-foot-high titanium doors built into the wall of the canyon.

"We could wait for the doors to open again, and then make our charge." Landon said, really only half-pondering the idea. It seemed farfetched, circumstantial.

And they were pressed for time.

"We only have thirty-seven minutes left." Jason said. "There's no-

He stopped and Landon could hear the distant hum of an anti-gravity system. It was getting closer.

Landon walked back and looked out from behind the huge rocks that made a sort of makeshift wall on top of the canyon. He almost laughed, it was so perfect.

"We've got ourselves a Prowler." He said, watching as the Covenant vehicle grew nearer. It was coming from the right, and would pass right by.

Jason leveled the alien Beam Rifle, sighting it in as he brought it up to his visor. "It looks like we've got our way in after all."

\* \* \*

>Meanwhile, Samuel and Victoria had gotten into the Prowler from the Armory, taken the anti-matter charge the Covenant had planted, and gone around the west side of the complex, finally arriving at the southernmost edge of the Training Ground, where over twenty Phantoms were hovering just off the ground. The abandoned 'garage' stood only a hundred yards away. <p>"How much bang do you think this thing packs?" Victoria asked, holding up the small Covenant bomb, which was roughly the size of a large dodgeball and weighed about thirty pounds.<p>

Samuel shrugged. "It's not very big for a Covenant explosive." He said. "But, it's got anti-matter as its real explosive, so you could very easily be holding an atom bomb in your hand." He shook his head. "There's no way to know, really."

"Until it goes off," she said. Samuel nodded, smiling.

\_Until it goes off,\_ he repeated in his head, looking at the

Phantoms. Indeed, it was going to go off, and, if all went well, it was going to take a whole load of Covenant down with it.

Really, he was shocked at how lightly-guarded the Phantoms were. There were minimal ground-troops outside the crafts and a full crew on each one, but nothing major stood in the way. There were no Chieftains that he could see, and no high-ranking Brutes wielding rifles or Fuel Rod Guns, just some low-level, pathetic Brute Minors and Majors.

"Alright," he said, running last-minute details through his mind, "here's how we're gonna do this."

Victoria stopped juggling the charge and looked up at him instantly.

"First," he said, "we're going to board one of the Phantoms together. We'll neutralize anything we find on the way in, and then I need you to play lookout while I plant the bomb inside the ship. After that, we're going to go scout out a few more ships and see if any of them have charges they haven't planted yet. If they **\*\*do\*\***, we're going to plant a few more."

"No problem," she said with a bit of uneasiness. "Can I ask you something, though?"

"Yes?"

"Is all this really necessary?" She asked. "I mean, we have so little time to get out of here already. The odds of us being able to plant these bombs and still reach our extraction point are low," she paused, then added, "at **\*\*best\*\***."

Samuel sighed. He'd thought the same thing. "Yes," he said. "It is necessary. I received the order straight from HIGHCOM before we left the Armory."

She seemed taken for a second. "HIGHCOM?"

He nodded slowly. "I didn't think it was a good idea either, but they sent the order to Demon while Zeke was explaining the bombs. Zeke told me everything and passed on the order to wipe every last Covenant soldier on the Training Ground off the face of the Earth."

Victoria nodded, reverting back to her usual self. "Well," she said, casually tossing the bomb a foot up in the air, "let's get started then." She snatched the charge one-handed before it could hit the ground.

\* \* \*

>Kadak watched as the Prowler came skidding down into the canyon, toward the door to the humans' "garage." The tired, miserable Grunt had been assigned the task of operating the controls the other Covenant soldiers had linked with the doors and mounted to the canyon wall. <p>"Stupid Brutes," he grumbled as the Prowler grew nearer. Inside, all he could make out was the head of a single, blue-armored Brute Captain piloting the craft.<p>



The Covenant vehicle slowed to a stop a few feet from Kadak. The Brute made a sound that, to Kadak, vaguely resembled a human cough, then looked right at him. "Open the door." It said in a deep voice.

"Fine," Kadak grumbled, straining to reach the controls that the Brutes had mounted just inches above where the Grunts could reach easily. He put in the code, and the doors began to open inwards, into the canyon.

The Captain nodded, and was about to move when two Brute Majors stepped out of the humans' garage, blocking the way in. "Brother," one growled, "where are the others? What happened to your group?"

The Brute shifted uncomfortably in the neck-high confines of the Prowler's driver-station. Before an answer came, however, Kadak heard what sounded like a Ghost entering the area from the sands. He turned to see one of the purple crafts careening through the canyon toward them, splattering the bodies of hapless Grunts and Brutes as it came. Driving it was one of the Demons, clad in gold-armor. The two Majors drew their Spikers.

"Not **this** time!" The one in the Prowler said in a **completely**-human tone. He brought up two Spike Grenades and threw them at the Majors, who were so close that one was impaled in the neck, the other right in the face.

Kadak turned to run, but heard gunfire from behind him and knew it was all over. He turned around just in time to watch the "Captain" throw its helmet to the ground, revealing its true self.

"**Another** Demon!" the Grunt yelled, but in vain. The Demon pulled up a human weapon Kadak didn't recognize and fired. He felt two bullets puncture his upper-body and his methane tank before falling to the ground.

He watched as the blood-spattered Ghost pulled up and the other Demon got out quickly. Kadak wanted to shriek as the one still inside the Prowler hefted a huge human-made weapon and held it on its shoulder. Through his blurred vision, he could make out five letters: **SPNKR**.

\* \* \*

>"Come on!" Jason said as he stepped off the Ghost and brought the Brute Shot to bear. "Let's **go**!"

Landon was out in a second, with the huge Rocket Launcher on his shoulder. He looked around and then looked to Jason. "You raised **Hell**." He said plainly.

Jason took a quick glance at the path he'd come down. Sure enough, there were about twenty alien bodies flung to the sides and scorched marks where he'd slowed down and fired the twin plasma cannons. He smiled. Yeah, he'd done a **little** damage.

A second later, he remembered their time-limit. "We need to get going." He said, and ran into the open doors even while the remaining

aliens outside started to come closer. Landon followed him inside, but Jason was too shocked by the place to even notice.

The 'garage,' as the Corporal had called it, was a single enormous room that stretched for just over a quarter-mile into the canyon. Rows of floodlights illuminated the entire area from the sides of the ceiling. And that was just the scenery.

In addition, there were **\*\*dozens\*\*** of UNSC vehicles in the place, although a lot of them had already been moved outside by the Covenant. Jason immediately saw two rows of Warthogs and Mongooses, and four UNSC Hornets.

"Holy **\*\*Hell\*\***," he said, stunned.

"Or just Hell!" the voice of his fellow Spartan echoed in his ears and a rocket launched behind him. There was an explosion, and Jason turned around to see smoke erupting from the pile of scrap that the Prowler had been made into. Next to it, two Brutes were on the ground, one missing a limb and the other's flesh burning.

Beyond them, a dozen more Covenant soldiers were gathering. Several of them were driving vehicles. Suddenly, another rocket flew into the mix, and two Ghosts that were hovering too close together both detonated in a rage of flames.

"We need to close the door!" Jason said, running over to the device the Covenant had mounted to the inside of the room, next to the doors. It was complicated and in an alien language. He didn't have a clue.

\_Damn it,\_ he thought, trying to decipher the several keys on the device. It was hopeless. There **\*\*was\*\*** a code, but he sure as Hell didn't know what it was.

"Landon!" he yelled. "I can't shut the doors!"

The other Spartan scoffed as he inserted another two rockets into his launcher. "I bet I can!" He said. Before Jason could object, Landon had launched the Rockets into the mix and run outside, right up to the device he had waited for the Grunt to use earlier to open the doors.

"What are you doing?"

"It's the universal door-lock." Landon said. Jason watched him pull out a Plasma Grenade and stick it on top of the Covenant piece of technology, then take off for the doors. As he was running back inside, the grenade exploded, destroying the device.

And the doors began to slowly swing shut.

Jason watched, almost laughing, as Landon came inside as the doors shut behind him. "Rule **\*\*one\*\***," he said, "if you destroy a lock from the inside, the doors will probably stay open. If you destroy it from the outside, the doors will swing shut to keep whoever's **\*\*outside\*\*** from getting **\*\*in\*\***."

Jason shook his head. "These are **\*\*aliens\*\*** who built that device," he said. "For all you know, that could've had **\*\*no\*\*** effect on the

doors at all."

He shrugged. "Don't hate me 'cause I'm **\*\*brilliant\*\***," he joked. "Because, honestly, I **\*\*guessed\*\*** and I'm **\*\*really\*\*** glad I was right."

Again, Jason only shook his head. \_He's out of his freakin' mind,\_ he thought with a smile. \_I mean, seriously-\_

BOOM!

Something hit the door beside them and exploded, and both Spartans turned around, bringing their weapons to bear.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Three more projectiles impacted, one with the wall and two near the Spartans' feet. Jason scanned the area until he saw the cause: a squad of four Brute Minors, two Majors, and a single, gold-armored Captain holding a Brute Shot were in the room with them, only about fifteen yards away.

"Well, I'm guessing the rest of the world should be getting a break from the Covenant troops!" Landon yelled as he launched both rockets into the mix, sending Covenant flying in all directions. "The **\*\*whole\*\*** damn **\*\*lot\*\*** of them came to **\*\*us\*\***!"

Jason used the distraction and ran into the group, charging the recovering Captain first. The alien was hunched over from the blast, but stood up to meet him when he was about to strike with the Brute Shot. As Jason swung the bladed weapon hard to the left, the Brute moved backwards, and the bayonet only barely connected with its shields.

The gold-armored alien drew back, and Jason pulled the weapon down to his thigh, turning it so that the end of the blade was pointing at the Brute's stomach. As it started to recover, he rammed the weapon forward, smashing it through the shields and putting a huge dent in the alien's armor.

"Demon!" the Brute roared out in rage, but its voice was drowned out as Jason unloaded two of the Brute Shot's grenades into the creature's face. Its helmet caved, and it fell limply to the ground.

Jason was pulling the gun up to reload when he felt a dozen small impacts on his back, and his HUD began to beep loudly, indicating that his shields had taken a hit. He turned to see a Brute Major only a few feet away from him, raising its Spiker like a knife rather than reloading it.

He braced himself for the hit and felt the impact on his shoulder as it cut his shields to nothing and dented his armor. Instead of recoiling, however, he used every ounce of strength in his biomechanical legs to jump forward, toward the Brute, and swung the Brute Shot again, this time up and to the left. The shot hit home and the alien's shields failed instantly as the blade carved a huge indent in its chest-plate before the armor fell completely off the Brute.

Without even letting the beast recover, Jason thrust the blade forward, putting a gaping, bleeding hole in the center of its chest. It struggled for a second, but Jason twisted the weapon and, in turn, the blade, and it stopped abruptly.

Jason heard footsteps to his left and glanced over to see an already-injured Brute Minor facing away from him. There were four muffled cracks as he fired the Brute Shot, and four subsequent explosions that reduced the Minor to little more than smoldering hide.

"\*\*Finally\*\*," he gasped when he realized that none of the aliens were left to attack him. He turned to see that Landon was tending to the last of Majors, who had gone berserk sometime before.

Jason watched with a sense of detachment as the Brute charged Landon, and he activated the shield on his arm, bracing himself and meeting the alien's charge with what must've felt like a brick wall. As it recoiled, Landon took down his shield and struck it over the head with the butt of the Rocket Launcher.

The alien roared in rage, but was silenced as the butt of the launcher hit it again, this time in the right cheek as Landon spun a full circle and swung. The Brute rolled across the floor, but was up immediately, charging again.

"This is ridiculous." Jason heard Landon's voice over the intercom. A second later, the Brute jumped up into the air and tried to land on him, but the Spartan activated both arm-shields, braced himself, and flipped the Brute over his head, sending it flying into one of the stone walls of the room.

\_Come \_\_\*\*on,\*\*\_ Jason thought, \_we don't have \_\_\*\*time\*\*\_\_ for this.\_ He was about to say something when the Brute charged again, foaming at the mouth.

"Alright," Landon's voice echoed in his ears, "here we go."

The Brute raised its arms to strike and Landon activated the shield on his left arm, stopping the strike prematurely and causing the Brute to stumble backwards in shock. While it was still recoiling, Landon primed a Plasma Grenade, shut down his shield, and stuck it to the creature's chest. Next, he pulled his arm back and braced himself as he activated both of his arm-shields.

A second later, the grenade detonated, \*\*frying\*\* both shields, but leaving Landon completely unharmed.

"Damn!" he yelled. "That was \*\*great\*\*! Did you \*\*see\*\* that shit?"

Jason nodded, impressed but also impatient. "Yeah, I did. Now we need to get going. We're running out of time."

Landon nodded, humbled, and Jason went sprinting down the lines of vehicles, looking for something worthwhile. He considered each option as he ran by.

\_Warthogs?\_ He thought, \_no. Mongooses? \_\_\*\*Yeah right\*\*\_\_. Hornets? Maybe. Gauss Warthogsâ€¦I don't-\_ He paused when he saw something

new.

"And **\*\*what\*\*** do we have here?" Landon asked before letting out a low whistle. "I think I know what **\*\*I'm\*\*** driving."

\* \* \*

>Victoria led the way onto the Phantom, trying to provide a decent distraction so that Samuel could plant the bomb. There had been only a few Covenant soldiers outside, and they hadn't posed much of a challenge at all. <p>"What do you see?" Samuel asked as he came up behind her.</p>

"Four Brutes," she said, looking around. There was even less resistance than she thought there'd be.

"Take 'em."

Victoria nodded and dashed into the Phantom like a marathon-runner. As the one Brute that had been facing her roared and reached for its weapon, it was mowed down by a hail of bullets from her Assault Rifle and a Fragmentation Grenade. She turned to the others.

"You guys picked the wrong planet." She said, holstering the rifle and grabbing the sword-hilt on her thigh. She activated it, letting the white-hot blade of energy emerge and causing the aliens to draw back slightly.

\_This is too easy.\_

She charged forward, zigzagging to avoid the spiked projectiles two of the Brutes were shooting at her. She ducked once to dodge a Spike Grenade and kept coming.

"Game's **\*\*over\*\***, boys!" She yelled when she reached the Brute closest to her. It was a haze of motion as she brought her right leg up and bent her knee, impaling the alien with the blade. Without stopping, she went around the left side of the soldier, dragging the plasma-blade through its stomach and out, and then spinning around, stabbing it in the chest with the blade on her left arm before tripping it with her left leg and coming around full circle to face the other Brutes.

The entire attack didn't take more than four seconds.

"De-Demon!" One of the Brutes tried to yell, but it came out as more of a stuttering gasp. A second later, it bent down and charged her, enraged.

Victoria rolled her eyes. \_They never learn.\_

\* \* \*

><p></p>

**\*\*Fire\*\*!**"

The Marines let out a rain of bullets down the corridor as they fled for the stairs. The few Brutes following them didn't slow down, however, and just kept charging. Before they reached them, however, a

pair of Frag Grenades served to finish their shields, and they fell, mere feet from the end of the hall.

Corporal Charles breathed deeply as he put another magazine into his Assault Rifle. He was down to only himself and three Marines. The others had all been lost to the Brutes, and they were only just now reaching the stairs to the second floor.

"Sir," a Marine said. Charles turned to see Private Scott facing him. "I'm out." He pointed to his Assault Rifle.

"Me too," another Marine said.

"Shit," the Corporal said. Things were just getting worse. He wondered where the Spartans were—if they'd \*\*survived\*\*. "Let's go," he said, ignoring the sound of footsteps in the hall they'd just come from.

He charged up the steps to the second floor, followed by the Marines, and nearly fell over when he ran into a pair of nine-foot-tall Spartans.

"Corporal!" the one in front said. Charles recognized Blaine's demeanor immediately. He was holding an enormous Gravity Hammer and had rockets on his back.

"Good to see you two!" He said, unsure of how to show gratitude to a Spartan, even after the years they'd spent in training. "They got in," he pointed down the stairs, where footsteps could already be heard. "And now they're on us like there's no tomorrow."

The other Spartan, Stephanie, walked past Charles and the three Marines and pointed the huge gun on her shoulder down the steps. Just as the first of the Brutes rounded the corner, she fired five times, sending giant bolts of green plasma down into the group of aliens trying to come up.

For a second, there was the sound of burning flesh and alien screams, but then, there was nothing.

"Not anymore." She said calmly, reloading the weapon.

The Corporal relaxed for a moment, and then remembered the bombs. "What about the anti-matter charges?" He asked. "Have you called for evac?"

Blaine shook his head. "Don't worry, sir. Everything's under control. Evac's on its way."

"Thank God," he said. Next, he turned to the Marines. "As of this moment, Blaine and Stephanie are in charge. You follow them, you \*\*might\*\* get out of here alive. Is that clear?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

He turned to the Spartans. "Ready when you are."

\* \* \*

>Blaine led the way through the building, stopping periodically to

let Stephanie mop up any Brutes that tried to catch up with them in the back of the group. They'd made it around, almost to the third floor when they heard something stumbling around above them.

<p>"Stephanie," Blaine said into the intercom. "You hear that?"<p>

"Brute," she said, "careful up there."

"Yeah," he said, waving it off as he led the way up. He got up and heard movement a room to his right, separated by a wall that ran all the way down the long corridor. Suddenly, the movement got close, until it seemed right beside him, and stopped.

\_I \_\_\*\*wonder...\*\*\_he thought, rearing back. A second later, he thrust both his giant arms through the wall and brought them together in a head-lock fashion. Sure enough, he'd caught something too, and it was struggling to get free.

Smiling, he gripped the head of the Brute on the other side and twisted, snapping its neck. And then, as the Marines looked on in awe, he moved on.

He had just reached the end of the corridor when Stephanie's voice came into his ears. "We've got a big group this time," she said. "I'm going to take care of it. You get them to the roof. We're almost there."

> Blaine stopped dead. "No," he said. "You're not taking them by yourself."<p>

"There could be more Brutes on this floor." She said. "You need to lead. Come back if you get to the roof and I'm not behind you."

"Stephanie, that's-"

"We don't have \*\*time\*\*! There's less than thirty minutes before the bombs go off!"

Irritated, Blaine led the Marines further down the corridor, speeding up to as fast as he could go and not lose them. He stopped when he heard an explosion on the floor below them.

"What was that?" one of the Marines asked. Blaine shook his head, listening for any activity on their own floor.

"There's nothing here," he said. "The four of you, get to the roof." He pulled out the hammer.

"Blaine," the Corporal said, "don't go getting yourself killed."

Blaine smiled. "Trust me, sir," he said, "I'll be fine. It's those alien pains-in-the-ass you should be worried about."

The Corporal nodded and led the Marines around the corner, where Blaine heard their footsteps begin to fade. He walked back the way they'd come, until the battle sounded like it was taking place directly below him.

"Freakin' Brutes," he said, raising the hammer above his head.

"Making my life a living Hellâ€¦time to return the favor." He struck as hard as he could, knocking an enormous chunk of the floor straight down onto the head of an unlucky Brute that just happened to be standing below him.

And then, he jumped down, into the mix.

There were four Brute Majors in a circle around him, and Stephanie was limping into the hall from a room to his right. There was a big, Spartan-sized hole in the wall of the room.

Before the stunned Brutes could even make a move, Blaine smashed the hammer down between two of them, sending one flying only a few feet through a wall, but sending the other through, first, the wall of the corridor, and, second, a window of the building.

There was a roar as another of the aliens charged him, but Blaine had officially had **\*\*all\*\*** he could take for one day. He brought the hammer out to his right and swung it like a baseball bat, knocking the Brute through the corridor wall before it was crushed against the titanium outer-wall of the building.

Knowing the other would lose it, he turned just in time to give the last Brute a crushing right hook that sent it rolling across the ground. Before it could get up, he raised the hammer once more and brought it down, ending the alien's stay amongst the living.

He turned to Stephanie, who was limping toward him. "One of them almost stuck me from the other room." She explained, pointing to her leg. "Spike Grenade went off, and it cut me up pretty bad." She paused for a moment, then added, "thanks."

Blaine nodded. "We need to get up to the roof."

\* \* \*

>"How many of you <strong>miserable<strong> S.O.B.'s are there?" Zeke yelled as two more Jump-Pack Brutes landed in front of him on the roof. He was completely out of Sniper Rifle ammo, and his sword's battery was near-empty.

He was only vaguely paying attention when he felt something hit the roof only a few inches behind him, and thrust his left elbow back, impaling the newly-arriving Brute in the stomach with its blade.

As it roared in agony, Zeke spun around behind it, impaling it once more, this time in the back and with his right arm. As he did so, he stuck a Plasma Grenade to its back and pushed the roaring alien right toward its comrades.

Not realizing what he'd done, the two of them reached out to catch their pack-mate, but yelled as they realized that the Brute had become a walking **\*\*bomb\*\***. They saw it too late, however, and the explosion swallowed them up, killing one and injuring the other.

"You know what?" Zeke said coldly as he walked up to the Brute that was now doubled-over. "You guys really need to figure out that, once you send a **\*\*hundred\*\*** soldiers to the roof a building and **\*\*none\*\*** return, you need to **\*\*try\*\***â€¦**\*\*something\*\***â€¦**\*\*else\*\***!" He



punctuated the sentence by thrusting the blade on his knee into the alien's neck.

Tired and agitated, Zeke used the break to walk over the side of the building and check on the remaining Covenant. There appeared to be only a few foot-soldiers, but the tanks were still circling around.

"Where are Landon and-?"

BOOM!

"What the-?"

BOOM!

One of the anti-air Wraiths exploded in a haze of blue steam. A second later, two more shots echoed throughout the area and Zeke watched two smoking projectiles impact with another one. A second later, the tank went up in flames.

He looked up and smiled despite himself. There, in the sand next to the Main Complex, were two enormous UNSC Scorpion Tanks, firing like there was no tomorrow. The Wraiths were decimated before they even realized what was going on.

"It's **\*\*about\*\*** **\*\*time\*\***." Zeke said proudly as he watched one of the last three tanks go up in a haze.

Suddenly, something pried his attention away from the spectacle. He had a feeling in his gut that something was about to go wrong. Something was about to ruin his newfound good mood. On an instinct, he walked to the center of the roof and watched the far side of the building.

And then, as if on cue, a single Jump-Pack Brute flew high above the building. Zeke cursed bitterly. It was holding a Gravity Hammer.

Ezekiel could only watch as the beast came down from the sky and was going to land mere feet in front of him. He wanted to get out of the way, but, even if he did, the roof wasn't that big. And there certainly wasn't a good place to hide.

But, before the alien could land, Zeke took off for the edge of the roof he'd been watching the tanks from. He didn't go fast enough, however, and when the hammer hit the ground, its sphere of gravitational energy hit him, combining with his already-present momentum to send him bouncing and crashing toward the edge. His HUD beeped annoyingly, telling him that his shields were completely gone.

Zeke bounced off the ground and slid, hitting his right arm on a large crate as he continued moving. Realizing he was about to fall right off the side, he put bent his arms and dug the blades on his elbows into the roof, trying to slow himself down.

It worked, somewhat, but not enough to keep him from sliding over the edge. He hit the raised perimeter of the roof and skipped over it, feeling a terrible pain in his ribs. Barely, he managed to grip the

edge with his left hand and held on with all he had. Below him, on the ground, he could see nothing but explosions and fire from what remained of the tanks.

He gripped the roof with his right hand when something hard pressed down on his left, all but **\*\*breaking\*\*** the bones in his hand. Zeke looked up to see the hammer-wielding Brute looking down at him, taking great pleasure in breaking his hand.

In spite of the situation, Zeke forced himself to laugh. He laughed loud enough that the Brute could hear it, and then pulled a Spike Grenade from his thigh. Before the beast could react, he primed it and stuck it hard into the alien's leg with his right arm.

Instantly, it stepped off his left hand and began howling. Unfortunately, his shields couldn't recharge fast enough to take the brunt of the explosion, and Ezekiel was forced to bottle a yell of agony as a few of the superheated spikes from the grenade dug into his armor and skin. He cringed in pain as the Brute stumbled and fell over the side of the building.

"Ahâ€|damn," he moaned. He didn't know anything could hurt so bad as his arms did at that moment. They burned from exhaustion. They burned from hitting metal crates and sliding across the roof. They burned from the hot spikes shot into them. He tried hard to pull himself up.

Finally, he got one arm up and over the ledge. He started to reach with the other when something grabbed his hand.

\_I'm \_\_**\*\*dead,\*\***\_ he thought, **\*\*knowing\*\*** in his mind that it was another Brute, there to **\*\*finally\*\*** finish him off. Instead of throwing him, however, the hand pulled him up, and he felt another help to bring him to his feet. He lifted his head to see Blaine and Stephanie with him, along with three Marines and the Corporal.

"You okay?" Stephanie asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Thanks."

The Corporal patted him on the back. "Hell of a job you guys did hereâ€|**\*\*Hell\*\*** of a job! I mean, these two, taking out **\*\*every\*\*** soldier in the building. And **\*\*you\*\***, holding dozens of them to the roofâ€|you guys are really everything we trained you to be, and **\*\*more\*\***."

Zeke was about to comment on how little the pep-talk was helping when he heard the roaring sound of an engine in the distance. He looked up to see a UNSC Pelican flying toward the Recovery Building.

"How much time is left?" He asked Blaine. The other Spartan paused.

"Fifteen minutes," he said.

"Where the Hell are Samuel and Vic?"

\* \* \*

>"Come on, Victoria." Samuel said into his helmet as he waited at the entrance to the Phantom. They'd successfully planted the first bomb and had finally found a second, un-activated one in another Phantom. And then, as they went for it, they were ambushed by almost a dozen Brutes. <p>Victoria had moved around them like a ghost, never being so much as <strong>grazed</strong> by their physical attacks and ducking most of their gunfire. Samuel, on the other hand, had elected simply to bring up his Spartan Laser, take a few shots to the chest as it charged, and then **\*\*annihilate\*\*** an entire group of miserable aliens.

They'd grabbed the bomb and were about to plant it when Samuel realized that his shot from the laser had fried a portion of the control panel. He didn't know if the Phantom would ever fly again, so he'd made the call to go to the next one and plant the anti-matter charge.

That's where Victoria was now: clearing the Phantom. Samuel could hear the sound of gunfire just inside, but was reluctant to go in, deciding instead to guard the entrance.

"How's it going in there, Vic?" He asked.

"Not too bad," she said, and he heard a Brute roar in agony. "I could use a little help though. There are a few left."

Samuel took a quick scan of the area and, when he saw no other Covenant, ran inside with his Shotgun at the ready. Within a **\*\*second\*\*** of coming in, he was face-to-face with a Brute Minor.

And then, he was face-to-**\*\*bone\*\*** as he blew the Covenant soldier's face right off its skull.

"Two more, Samuel!" Victoria said, pointing behind him. He turned to see a Major and Minor, both with Spikers.

Samuel shook his head. The Covenant just didn't get it: small, inexperienced soldiers against Spartans just wasn't going to cut it. He ran straight for the two aliens, shooting one before he closed the gap and tackling the other with all the force of a small train. Before the alien could even consider getting up, he pressed the Shotgun hard to its chest and pulled the trigger. When that didn't **\*\*quite\*\*** do it, he pulled it again.

He stood up, covered in crimson blood, to see Victoria stab the last Brute on-board. She turned and looked at him when the beast fell onto the floor.

"Time to leave?" she asked.

"Just about," Samuel answered. He walked over to one side of the ship and looked at the wall. He searched for anything that looked loose, found a vent with several cords and tubes behind it, and ripped it from the wall like cheap plastic.

\_This is it,\_ he thought, taking the charge and sticking it down, deep into the electrical workings of the ship. He grabbed the vent and stuck it roughly back in place, then turned to Victoria.

"Time to go," he said.

She nodded, activating the Energy Sword. "I just hope the others called for evac and got the Corporal and the Marines out okay."

"I'm sure they did." He said, leading the way out of the ship and jumping down into the sand. Victoria hit the ground a second later.

"Hey, paging Samuel and Victoria," a voice echoed in his helmet. It was Jason. Samuel was about to answer when another voice penetrated his head.

"Paging Medusa and Goliath," the voice paused, "Medusa or Goliath, can you hear me?"

It was Zeke.

"I really **\*\*hate\*\*** him sometimes." Victoria said jokingly.

"Yeah Zeke," Samuel said, "we're down at the Phantoms. Where are you guys?"

"We're in the Pelican, on the ground near the Recovery Building." This time, it was Blaine. "We'll be leaving to come get you in just a minute. You guys get the bombs planted?"

Samuel shook his head, trying to get a feel for who he was about to be speaking to. "Yeah," he said, "they're all set. Let's get out of here before the **\*\*rest\*\*** of the Covies show up."

"You got it, big guy."

Samuel shrugged. It was Landon this time.

"There's about twelve more minutes before the bombs go off. We'll be there in three."

"I'll hold you to it."

The words had only **\*\*just\*\*** left his mouth when the whole thing went to **\*\*Hell\*\***.

\* \* \*

>"Let's get this show on the road!" Landon said as the pilot started up the Pelican. The metal bird lifted off the ground and quickly gained altitude until it was high above the Recovery Building, and Blaine caught a glimpse of the Phantoms over the back as it spun around. <p>As the huge vehicle started to move toward the Phantoms, Blaine saw something strange in the forward-viewing camera-monitor. There were spots in the sandsâ€¦lots of them. He had to squint and get closer to truly see what he was looking at.<p>

"Oh **\*\*shit\*\***." He said. Zeke came up behind him.

"Where the **\*\*Hell\*\*** did they come from?"

Blaine shook his head as the other Spartans gathered around them. "I have no idea. They weren't there a minute ago, were they?"

Zeke shook his head.

"Guys!" a voice yelled into each of their helmets. It was Samuel. "We're in a lot trouble down here! They just started pouring out of the remaining Phantoms! Someone or something told each and every one of them that we were down here! You guys need to get **\*\*out\*\*** of here, right **\*\*now\*\***!"

Blaine turned to the pilot, brushing past the Corporal and the Marines to get there. "Take us in low."

The pilot shook his head furiously. "**\*\*Hell no\*\***!" he yelled. "I'm not goin' nowhere **\*\*near\*\*** those aliens!"

Blaine drew back, furious and frustrated. He was about to say something when Zeke flew in front of him. His arms were bent, and both elbow-mounts were glowing with blue-white plasma.

**\*\*Look\*\***," he growled, activating the Energy Sword in his hand and letting the pilot get a good look. "Either you **\*\*grow\*\*** a set and take us down there, or I'm gonna cut **\*\*off\*\*** whatever you've got."

Blaine pulled him back. "Enough." He said, rolling his eyes. The pilot's eyes were wide as saucers, filled to the brim with fear. "Just take us down."

Before the pilot could argue, the Corporal pushed past them. "That's an **\*\*order\*\***, Marine. Take us down low. We've got a few minutes to spare." The pilot was shaking, but followed the order.

As the plain descended, the Spartans gathered toward the back.

Jason broke the silence as they got closer. "Now, don't get me wrong," he said, "but what are our chances if we do this? Can we really expect to get down there, save them, and **\*\*still\*\*** get out before the bombs go off?"

Blaine shook his head. "Maybe not," he said. "But our chances aren't **\*\*that\*\*** bad, and I'm **\*\*not\*\*** leaving them behind."

"I'm just saying, is it wise, **\*\*statistically\*\*** speaking?"

Zeke interrupted. "Here's the only statistic that should matter to you: if Samuel goes, **\*\*I've\*\*** already called dibs on leadership. He dies, and **\*\*I'm\*\*** the one giving the orders from now on. I called it. I'm next in line. Now, how many of you wanna stay on the ship?"

Blaine smiled. No one said a word.

\* \* \*

>Samuel grabbed the nearest Brute by the neck and flung it away from him like a rag doll, trying hard to block out the constant beeping of his suit's alarm-system. He turned and pulled the trigger on the Shotgun, blowing a chunk out of another Brute's neck. <p>Things had been perfect. They'd set the bombs, called for evac, everything. Everything was exactly as he'd planned.<p>

And then, out of nowhere, over fifty Covenant soldiers poured out from the Phantoms around them, all at once, surrounding them with gunfire and trying to mow the two Spartans down.

Samuel felt something hit his back and turned just in time to dodge a second grenade from a Captain's Brute Shot. He primed a Plasma Grenade and threw it as hard as he could, sticking the creature right at the shoulder. It let out an alien howl as it exploded and pieces of it littered the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye, Samuel could see Victoria fighting a Brute Captain. She stabbed it in the chest just as another Brute ran up behind her. Somehow, without even turning **\*\*around\*\***, she **\*\*knew\*\*** it was there, because she did a back-flip and bent her knees, letting the twin blades impale the creature at the chest level, leaving her hanging upside down.

She laughed coldly and straightened her legs, effectively ripping the chest open as she jumped and landed on her feet behind the Brute. A second later, another white-hot blade of energy emerged from its chest as she finished it.

Suddenly, Samuel heard something and turned to see the Pelican approaching from the Recovery Building. He sighed. There was nothing to be done for them now. There were just too many. Their chances were nonexistent.

To his surprise, however, as it was about to pass over them, the Pelican descended until it was less than fifteen feet from the ground and flew right over the group of two Spartans and dozens of Covenant.

And then, their chances changed. From the back of the Pelican, five super-soldiers jumped out and landed in the fray. As they did so, a pair of unlucky Brutes ran for the back of the Pelican, only to be met with a whirlwind of bullets and four Fragmentation Grenades from the Marines inside. Samuel turned to watch the Spartans and stopped, **\*\*stunned\*\***.

Jason and Landon had jumped into the same area, each of them landing on a Brute Major and crushing the alien's organs under their boots. From there, they charged through with a pair of Shotguns, first **\*\*plowing\*\*** aliens over with their shields, then blowing them to Hell. Instead of reloading their guns when they were empty, the two simply kept charging with their shields up, mowing down any of the weaker Brutes **\*\*dumb\*\*** enough to stay in their way and then crushing them under the weight of their huge, mechanical legs.

Samuel glanced over to see Stephanie alone, but easily holding her own with a Fuel Rod Gun on her shoulder. She launched five huge bolts of plasma into the mix, sending the burnt bodies of fallen Covenant in all directions. When a Brute Minor came up behind her, she dropped the gun, primed two Spike Grenades, and stuck them to both sides of its neck before grabbing its arm, spinning, and letting it go, sending the alien rolling away as it exploded in a mass of spikes.

Finally, Samuel saw Ezekiel and Blaine both bailing Victoria out of a mess of the Brutes. Blaine simply barreled into the group, sending a knee into one alien's gut before clasping both hands together above

his head and sending them crashing down on the creature's skull.

He immediately moved on, found another Brute, this one already wounded, and punched the creature in the stomach so hard that its back bulged and it fell forward, coughing up blood.

Zeke was fighting his way, taking on the Brutes on Victoria's other side as she recovered. Samuel watched as a Brute Minor charged him, and the smaller Spartan simply dodged nimbly around, using his augmented speed to toy with the beast. Finally, he kicked low, hitting the Brute in the knee. In the midst of a **\*\*horrible\*\*** cracking sound, it fell forward, where Zeke skewered it with the sword.

When a second Brute came up, Zeke bent his knee and thrust the blade into its stomach. As it doubled over, roaring, he primed a Frag Grenade and stuck it into the alien's open mouth. The creature's eyes widened as he grabbed it by the throat and tossed it aside.

Samuel smiled, despite the gruesome scene at hand. This **\*\*wasn't\*\*** it. They weren't dead yet.

"Spartans!" the Corporal's voice echoed in his ears. "Time's almost up! We **\*\*need\*\*** to go, **\*\*now\*\***!"

In an instant, each of the five Spartans finished whatever Brute they'd found and ran back to the still-hovering Pelican. Samuel ran for it as well, jumping up to it easily and climbing inside. Blaine hopped in last, right after Victoria.

He turned to Samuel as the Pelican lifted. **\*\*Told\*\*** you we'd show."

Samuel nodded, still catching his breath. There were dents and marks in his armor and his back hurt where he'd been hit with a grenade from a Brute Shot but, other than that, he was okay. More importantly, he was **\*\*alive\*\***.

They **\*\*all\*\*** were.

"Thanks guys," he said. "I'd have **\*\*never\*\*** been able to order you to do that."

Zeke laughed. "No, but **\*\*I\*\*** would have. That's why they all jumped."

Samuel didn't get it, but he didn't care. He sat down and looked out the back of the Pelican as they left Zulu Training Ground behind. He watched as the Phantoms started to lift off and suddenly remembered the bombs.

"How much time is left?"

Blaine looked to the Corporal, who checked his watch. "Thirty secondsâ€¦ **\*\*now\*\***."

Samuel counted the seconds down in his head as the Training Ground began to fade away into the midday sun. Soon, he was counting the last ones down as the Covenant Phantoms were flying high above the base.

\_Four|three|two|one-\_\_

**\*\*BOOM\*\*!**

A series of six explosions went off behind the Pelican, a few on the ground and two in the air, where the Phantoms had been. They were so powerful that, even at several miles away, the entire plane rattled violently and the pilot had to work to keep control. They engulfed the entire area, and Samuel lost any view of his second home as it was covered in domes of light.

"Nice light show," Landon said. "So|what's on the agenda for tomorrow?"

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's (Ending) Notes: Well, that's it. I really hope you liked it. I know some of it was kind of hard to follow, but I had to split them up to do it, and I couldn't just focus on one or two of them. Please, please leave me a review to tell me what you thought.<strong>

**\*\*After this, I've got ideas running through my head, but I haven't decided if I want to do a quick segment with Zulu Company and the Flood, or if I should move straight on into their next mission (which involves MORE hoards of Covenant, MORE bombs, and something else I'm keeping secret for now...). If you would, I'd appreciate input on where to go next. Trust me, the Flood will play their part, but it won't be until later, unless I do a quick one now. Just let me know, and thanks for reading!\*\***

## 25. Chapter 24: Winning & Losing

**\*\*Author's Notes: First off, sorry it's a little late, and sorry it's a little short. I was going to do one "recoup" chapter after the battle, but decided to do two of them, so I've got another one on the way that's longer than this one, but not the typical 8000+ (which some of you, I'm sure, are happy about, after my last one...). This one is just for the sake of a little R&R for the Spartans. Next time, they'll get some new orders, and I'll send them off again.\*\***

**\*\*Also, I've gotten a complaint here and there about how long the last couple of chapters were. I would just like to say that I wanted to get everything in, and didn't have a really good spot to split the chapters up. From now on, however, I promise to make nothing that long again. I will find a spot, and I will cut a chapter in two if need be. HOWEVER, if I do this, no one has any right to yell at me for a cliff-hanger, m'kay:)\*\***

**\*\*For now, though, how about the Reviews?\*\***

**\*\*Lord of the Trees: Hey! Glad you liked the action, and could sit through 12,000 words. You get props, my friend. Thanks for your input on the Flood as well. Finally, as to your request: I promise, they'll be fighting next to the Elites in my next "action-segment," in just a couple of chapters. I would've had them do it during the Zulu Battles, but I really wanted them to kind of go "on-their-own." Maybe it's weird, but, regardless, I'll have the split-lip aliens for you**



in just a bit! Thanks again!\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey, thanks for your review and your input on the Flood. Trust me, they'll be in space later on, AND they'll fight the Flood later on. I've got that all worked out...I just wanted to get a little input on whether or not I should give them a taste of the parasite beforehand. Thanks again for your input on that!\*\*

\*\*WolfyWolf: Lots of explosions, huh? You ain't seen nothin' yet. ;) As for Landon...hehehe, now that you mention it, yeah, I guess he is. Honest, I wasn't thinking of Dom, but you're right, it fits. Also, in regards to the Close Quarters Combat...oh YES, I'm a big fan of it, so I promise you'll see plenty more. Thanks for the compliments, and I hope you enjoy what's coming soon.\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Hi, and thanks for your compliments! For what you said about the space-travel...yeah, I'm drooling over here waiting to write it, lol. If I could, I'd skip all the way there, for the very thoughts and scenarios that got me started on this story, but...well, you know, can't really do that, lest I should lose the majority of my readers, lol. I'm curious, which part of Zeke's fight did you like, if there was one? Or what was funny (I like Zeke...that's why I ask...)? In regards to Magnus...you can expect him back...but not soon...sorry. Promise though, I'll bring him back. Last, thanks for the input on the Flood. I think I'm gonna leave them out for now and bring them in later, like I originally planned.\*\*

\*\*GuardianXAngel: Oh yeah! Full-throttle is RIGHT! lol, I was hoping someone would comment on the heavy stuff. If that's what people like, you can expect to see a whole lot more of it ('cause I certainly like it). Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: Hey, I sent you an e-mail, but I don't know if you ever got it. I was asking you where you got your information as to when the Flood first hit Earth, and if you have a definitive timeline for Halo 3, by chance. It would help me with dates considerably, but I can't find one anywhere. As for your thoughts, since I'm holding back using the Flood for a while...trust me, their first encounter will be doozy. And they WILL do some space-fighting later on, but I've got one more segment first. This is the one on Earth where I pull out all the stops... ;)\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: hehehe, thanks man. I like the ten-word segment. ;) I would put the Flood in, but I think I'm gonna go with majority and stick with what I wanted to do originally: hold them 'til later. Thanks for the compliments though. I hope you like the next few chapters!\*\*

\*\*Now, for number 24: (NOT the Number 23 (sry, that movie came up in topic today and...just...no. Not here.))\*\*

\*\*

\* \* \*

><strong>

\*\*Chapter 24:\*\*

**\*\* - Winning & Losing - \*\***

**\*\*1800 Hours - December 28, 2552\*\***

**\*\*Marine Outpost, Undisclosed Location in Northern Arizona\*\***

Blaine jumped out of the Pelican as soon as the other Spartans were out of the way and hit the ground heavily. At that moment, he didn't care about Zulu Training Ground. He didn't care about the Human/Covenant War. Hell, he didn't even care **\*\*where\*\*** the Pelican had taken him. All he cared about was **\*\*when\*\*** and **\*\*where\*\*** he was going to get some sleep.

"The unused barracks are in that building, down the hall, on your left." One of the Marines that had come out to greet them said, pointing to a steel structure twenty meters away. Blaine nodded and fell into step with the other Spartans as they walked toward the base.

They walked in complete silence, reaching the door to the building before Landon broke it. "Man," he said, talking to no one in particular, "we weren't even **\*\*in\*\*** combat for very long, and I'm pretty-well spent."

There were mumbles of agreement and Blaine found himself suddenly concerned. It was true: they'd only been fighting for around twelve hours, and, while they weren't completely wiped by the experience, they were tired—**\*\*too\*\*** tired. In addition, no one had slept on the Pelican during the four-hour ride from the Training Ground. He knew in his gut that they'd have never made it in a real-life, **\*\*drawn-out\*\*** combat experience.

At the same time, it didn't seem fair not to count their last struggle as "real-life." They'd been attacked after only a few hours' sleep and had lost one of their own almost immediately. Afterwards, they fought **\*\*nonstop\*\*** for twelve hours, getting only miniscule breaks in between the slaughters.

Samuel, at the front of the line, reached the door to the barracks and opened it up, holding it open for the rest of the Spartans as they filed in. Blaine nodded to him as he stepped inside and heard the door close behind him. He looked around to see almost two-dozen single-size beds, all of them empty.

**\*\*Finally,\*\*** he thought, finding two of them and sliding them together. He tried to lie down, but realized that, even with two, the beds weren't big enough. The Spartan got up, grabbed another, and slid it next to his makeshift king-size bed. He unlatched his helmet and felt the weight lifted from him as he took it off and set it on the bed next to him.

"It's over." He whispered quietly, thinking of the last sixteen hours. Deep down, Blaine couldn't believe how **\*\*close\*\*** they'd come, and how many times. He shook his head. One time, they hadn't just come **\*\*close\*\***, they were caught off-guard, and Chris paid his life for it. "It's over." He said again.

A moment later, he barely caught Zeke's voice from across the room. "It's **\*\*not\*\*** over." He said.

\* \* \*

>The next morning, after the Spartans had slept through the day and night, the Corporal sent a pair of Marines to wake them up early for breakfast, the first meal they'd have had in almost two days. His plan was to call them in to eat, and then give them the death-toll from the battle at the Training Ground. <p>Personally, he was hugely impressed. Apart from losing Chris to the sneak-attack on the barracks, the Spartans had had no casualties and Covenant losses were estimated to be in the <strong>high</strong> six-hundreds. Granted, it was nowhere **\*\*near\*\*** the level of slaughter the Master Chief had inflicted several times in the past, but, for their first time being on the defensive, Zulu Company had done a better-than-average job.

When the seven super-soldiers arrived in the mess hall and sat down to a table full of food, the Corporal walked up to them from the front of the room, clapping his hands quietly as he did so. Immediately, the Spartans stood up and saluted, perfectly still until he told them otherwise.

"At ease," Charles said cheerfully. "You guys have earned a good meal, so why don't you have at it while I give you the news?"

Zulu Company's hands all fell and the seven Spartans sat down to their meals.

"Great," the Corporal said, grabbing a piece of toast from the table and taking a huge bite out of it. This was his first meal as well.

"So," Blaine said in between bites of a pancake, "what's the final score from the Training Ground?"

The Corporal smiled. "Right now, the unofficial score is 680 to 1."

A few of the Spartans smiled and nodded confidently. Some, however, only looked to the floor, shaking their heads.

"Six-hundred-and-eighty to one," Samuel said, gritting his teeth. "We lost."

Ezekiel had taken a huge drink of water and couldn't stop himself from spitting it all over his plate. He turned to Samuel, his eyes full of disbelief and his mouth open. "How do you **\*\*figure\*\***?" He asked. "Last I checked, **\*\*we're\*\*** still here, and **\*\*they're\*\*** not."

The Corporal thought about saying something, but decided against it. This was a team-lesson that was going to have to be learned eventually.

"We **\*\*lost\*\***," Samuel said, "because we lost one of our own." He sighed and shook his head. "We lost the battle the **\*\*moment\*\*** we lost Chris."

Zeke shook his head, and Charles watched as Landon, Blaine and Stephanie did the same. "We took out better than half-a-**\*\*thousand\*\***"

Covenant." Zeke said. "Granted, they took one of ours, but does **\*\*really\*\*** constitute calling the whole battle a loss?"

Samuel nodded without an ounce of hesitation. "Think about it." He said. "Even if we'd killed **\*\*ten-thousand\*\*** Covenant, there were only eight of us. Did we kill one-**\*\*eighth\*\*** of the Covenant army?"

The Corporal smiled despite himself. Samuel was a better leader than he'd ever given him credit for in basic. Somehow, even though he'd only been through a few real conflicts, the Spartan had learned to look at the big picture and see things exactly as they were.

Zeke shook his head. "That's ridiculous." He said bitterly.

"He's right." Landon said, gulping down what remained of his water. "We **\*\*earned\*\*** our first **\*\*real\*\*** victory yesterday. Yes, Chris is gone, but that doesn't mean we failed."

Ezekiel stood up. "We may not have taken out an eighth of the Covenant's soldiers, but we sure as **\*\*Hell\*\*** got the message across that the Earth's not their little playground! We took on-"

"Chris is **\*\*dead\*\***!" Victoria said suddenly, jumping in. "We didn't win **\*\*anything\*\***!" She paused as Ezekiel looked at her, dumbstruck, then added, "and even if we **\*\*did\*\***, even if the statistics **\*\*didn't\*\*** show a loss, Chris is still **\*\*dead\*\***."

"Yeah," he said, "I'm **\*\*well\*\*** aware of that." His tone went from bitter to downright sardonic. "Something you all need to realize, however, is that **\*\*no\*\*** amount of whining or talking about it is going to bring him **\*\*back\*\***. The fact isn't lost on me that one of our own is dead, but neither is the fact that, in **\*\*this\*\*** war, at **\*\*this\*\*** point, winning is all that **\*\*matters\*\***."

"Winning isn't everything." Samuel said, frustrated.

"I know," Zeke answered, "it's just the only thing that **\*\*counts\*\***."

"Alright," the Corporal said, deciding to stop the discussion before it became any worse. "That's enough for now. The only other numbers you need are these: we lost forty-six members of the Zulu Training Ground staff, including Marines. On the plus-side, twenty-two Covenant Anti-Air Wraiths were destroyed, along with sixteen Banshees, twenty-one Ghosts, eight Brute Prowlers, seventeen Choppers, and, finally, twenty-four Covenant Phantoms."

"Damn," Landon said. Jason whistled.

"Regardless of which side you take as to whether or not you **\*\*won\*\*** the last battle, you need to know that you inflicted **\*\*major\*\*** casualties on the Covenant's forces near here and that **\*\*everyone\*\*** at HIGHCOM is **\*\*very\*\*** impressed with your performance." He paused. "Also, and less importantly, I too am **\*\*very\*\*** impressed. You've all become greater soldiers than anyone thought possible."

No one said anything, but the Corporal could see glimpses of smiles on a few faces in front of him. Suddenly, Jason looked up.

"Sir," he said, "I was wondering about something."

"Yes?"

"What happened to the General?"

The Corporal felt his heart skip a beat. He'd been unfortunate enough to learn precisely what had happened to General Malone. Charles took a deep breath before bothering to answer.

"The Generalâ€¦" he started, but trailed off. It took him several seconds to regain his composure. "General Malone is dead."

It was eerie, how none of the Spartans even moved in response to the answer. They only stared, waiting for more information.

"He was taken by a handful of Covenant Brutes that left via a support Phantom long before the anti-matter charges were ever placed. Malone is assumed KIA." He fell silent.

\_Or \_\_\*\*worse,\*\*\_ he thought, shaking his head subconsciously at the thought of what Brutes did to human prisoners.

Finally, Victoria broke the silence. "So," she said cautiously, "when are we holding funeral services?"

Charles checked his watch. "In about forty minutes," he said.

\* \* \*

>An hour later, the Spartans were gathered with the half-dozen remaining Marines from the Training Ground and thirty staff-members of the base they were at, somewhere in northern Arizona. Ezekiel was in the back of the group, arms crossed, contemplating the discussion from before as the Lieutenant offered words of praise for the fallen and words of encouragement for those still alive.  
<p><em><strong>We're<strong>\_\_ still alive,\_\_ he thought. \_That's \_\_\*\*hardly\*\*\_\_ cause for so much anger and depression. \_He couldn't lie, even to himself. Losing Chris had done a number on him when it first happened. Even while his fellow Spartan was still struggling as he was being pinned to the wall by the huge, spiked wheel on the front of the Chopper, Ezekiel had found that he could do nothing. He was stunned, as they all had been.

If they had been thinking, actually doing something, perhaps the Spartans could've stopped Chris' death from occurring. But, as it happened, no one but Chris had been prepared for the attack, and that very bit of awareness had cost him his life.

Ezekiel clenched his fist, furious both with the Brute that had been driving the Chopper and with himself for doing nothing. "I stood and \*\*watched\*\*," he growled under his breath.

"There's nothing to be done about it now." Blaine said, suddenly beside him. "None of us could've stopped it."

"We could've \*\*tried\*\*."

Blaine nodded. "Yes, we could have."

"So why didn't we?"

"I don't know." He whispered, shrugging. "We weren't ready. That's what it really comes down to. We were taken by surprise, and Chris put his own life on the line for Samuel's." He paused before continuing, with more than a hint of mockery, "while you're **\*\*right\*\***, and **\*\*no\*\*** amount of whining will change it, you should know that no amount of **\*\*dwelling\*\*** will do so either."

Zeke scoffed. "**\*\*I'm\*\*** the smart-ass around here." He said.

\* \* \*

>Samuel listened attentively as the Lieutenant read through the list of the soldiers who were killed at the Training Ground. There were quite a few of them, and he waited anxiously for the man to reach Chris' name. <p>"General Irvin Malone spent the last twenty-six years of his life with the Marines." The Lieutenant said, apparently finished with the seemingly-endless list of doctors and Private-level Marines lost. "He was a good man, and a greater soldierâ€|"<p>

Samuel suddenly tuned the man out. The General had been **\*\*anything\*\*** but a "good man." He'd tried on **\*\*numerous\*\*** occasions to have members of Zulu Company killed or otherwise decommissioned, and even after they succeeded in **\*\*thrashing\*\*** the Covenant in Phoenix, he **\*\*still\*\*** refused to acknowledge them as real soldiers, worthy of his time.

"Finally, we have the last soldier on the list." The Lieutenant said, snapping Samuel from his thoughts. "He died early yesterday morning, in a sneak-attack made by those cowardly soldiers above us, hiding in their ships and behind their shields."

Samuel sighed. Even if there **\*\*hadn't\*\*** been only one soldier left, he'd have recognized the description without even trying.

"And let **\*\*everyone\*\*** know, that this man, this **\*\*Spartan\*\***, fought bravely in the name of humanity and refused to let another soldier fall, even at the cost of his own life. His name was Christopher Stryker, **\*\*Spartan 010\*\***. He was one of the **\*\*best\*\***, and serves as an inspiration to us all."

Samuel closed his eyes. "Amen," he said.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: As said, this one was pretty short. Please put the torches and pitchforks away (lol), 'cause I promise to have the next one up pretty soon. Thanks for reading, and don't hesitate to tell me what you think!<strong>

## 26. Chapter 25: New Orders

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Alright, first, to all the people who loyally read this story: my humblest apologies. During the holiday season, as I'm sure you can understand, things got just the slightest bit hectic, and I was unable to work on this as much as I wanted to. In addition to that, I finally finished this chapter early on this week, and then subsequently decided to make a major plot change for the next few

chapters...and I had to redo it. So yeah...that's why it's so late. Throw in a minor case of Writer's Block, and you've got my problem.\*\*

\*\*However, in the future, I promise to do all I can to avoid two-week intervals in-between chapters. It throws me off too. As long as I have no major cases of Writer's Block or some random emergency, chapters will be posted just as soon as I can make them worthwhile for you to read. Okay? Thank you. :)\*\*

\*\*Now, reviews (while I still get some, lol):\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey, I considered the idea and pretty much took a poll on the Flood from everyone, and I think I'm gonna hold off on them until later, like I'd originally planned. Thanks very much for your input though. I'll probably be asking for more later on.\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: lol, I don't know if stuff will get cut short or not. Hopefully, there won't be cause for it. But, I know that, for some people, to sit and scroll through 12,000 words of text (some of it bolded or italicized, lol), is a real brain-killer. Heck, it certainly is for me to proofread. Thanks for the review, though, and YES, Malone is dead and buried...err...eaten.\*\*

\*\*WolfyWolf: Hey, thanks for the review and compliment! You should know, the fighting hasn't started up just yet, as this one will be their introduction to the next segment...but, after that, I'm sending in the super-soldiers for a little more havoc on the Covenant lines. hehehe.\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Thank you! There are several reviewers I can count on to hear from, and you are one of them! Thanks much for the compliment, and I hope you like the lead-up chapter to the next segment of all-out war. ;)\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: I'm glad someone commented on that. I didn't want to take too long and make a huge deal out of their disagreement, but I did want to draw attention to the fact that they don't all view war the same way. I got Ghosts of Onyx, by the way...haven't read it yet, though. Plan to. lol. Thanks again!\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: Electrocutation? Surgery? I applaud the originality. :) hehehe...love it... Also, lol, back on track, thanks for your input on the last one. I know it was a little...shallow, as far as actual content goes. As you've probably picked up on, I have trouble writing in general (lol), but I have major problems with debriefings and such. They do not come easy to me, and it shows miserably. But again, thank you, and I hope you like the next segment, once it really gets going.\*\*

\*\*zned51: Meh, I know it's short, but I couldn't have added a whole lot to it anyway. Really, I thought about combining it with this one here, except that they're at two different times, and I HATE doing that. I know it was short, but this one was supposed to come right after, so...yeah...didn't happen, but...ANYWAY, I tried to cut down on the bolding. Really, I checked back and I might've overdid it in a few chapters, but last chapter in particular I think I just went overboard a little. It shouldn't happen again.

Thanks!\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Hola! Thanks for the review, lol. You can go a chapter or two without a review...especially when I go a week or two without a chapter, lol. What was your bone with it? I think...oh yeah, nvmd. I remember.\*\*

\*\*Passerbywanderer: lol, hello. I don't know if "suck" is the right word. It would suck to become one and then DIE during the augmentations and such. I think, passed that...well, it would take some getting-used-to, but it would have its perks too. Thanks for the compliment.\*\*

\*\*1 way ticket: lol, no, the Spartans of Zulu Company are not known for tolerance...especially when it comes to two-legged aliens holding large guns. In that instance, the words "attack and kill with extreme prejudice" tend to fit much better. But, you know me, so you know that a few of the characters aren't going to be known for their patience or kindness anyway. ;) \*\*

\*\*Also, in regards to the Covenant Army...it's big enough for you to disregard any numbers I use to describe it unless they're in the millions or hundreds-of-thousands. Otherwise...assume no large dent was made. Perhaps Gormanuyai could give us an actual number, but I'm too lazy to look one up right at this moment. Ask me next time you see me, lol.\*\*

\*\*Finally, the funeral...well, yeah. It did suck. And the comment you made about Zeke...It's not a self-blame game. It's an "I-screwed-up-and-someone-else-paid-for-it. Why-did-I-do-that?" type of game. ;)\*\*

\*\*Now, to the chapter that was postponed for an extra week because of my busy schedule and having to redo it. Before you even start, know that it's another info-chapter, but it should be a little better (and longer) than the last one. After this, though, I'm bringing the guns and smack-talk back. ;)\*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 25:<strong>

\*\* - New Orders - \*\*

\*\*1100 Hours - January 1, 2553\*\*

\*\*UNSC Weapons Research Station - Los Angeles, California\*\*

Captain John Morris fired the last four rounds from his sidearm before holstering the weapon and running for the door after his squad. As he flew into the building, one of the Marines already inside pressed buttons on a wall-mounted monitor and the huge, two-foot-thick, Titanium-A door swung slowly shut.

The Captain hunched over and grabbed his knees, panting. Outside, he could hear the whining sound of superheated plasma splashing across the door. He couldn't believe how fast the Covenant had mounted an attack. One second, he was watching a pair of Phantoms landing more



than half a mile south of the station. The next, his team was trading fire with nearly thirty alien soldiers.

"Sir, we've just received word from Alpha and Gamma Squads." Private Scott Hill said as he stepped toward the Captain. "Their doors are shut and locked too."

Morris nodded his head and stood up, having finally caught his breath. He could still hear plasma hitting the door. "What about Delta and Zeta?"

Hill shook his head. "Nothing from them yet, sir," he said.

The Captain looked up at the ceiling, trying to think of the best way to stay alive. He'd been told, only hours before, that his squad and four others would be in charge of guarding the major entrances to the UNSC Weapons Research Station from Covenant attacks. He was never told why or for how long. Hell, he wasn't even told, for sure, whether or not the Covenant would mount an attack. His orders were short and clear: **\_\_If\_\_** they attack, keep them out at all costs.\_

Morris subsequently learned from one of his more technologically-inclined Marines, Private Dave Bolding, that this "Weapons Research Station" was actually a storage plant for something the UNSC was keeping secret, to be revealed on a "need-to-know" basis. The Captain had only heard stories and rumors about what was inside, and nothing he'd heard so far was remotely plausible.

Until today, he hadn't been in major combat for almost a month. His troops had been stationed in southern Oregon, and no one had seen so much as a glimpse of the Covenant there. It was almost like the war hadn't even been going on.

The Captain shook his head. **\_\_Not anymore,\_\_** he thought, looking at the door and listening to the sound of plasma burning on the other side. He could still hear the yelling of the Covenant Brutes on the outside, barking commands and no doubt ordering the smaller aliens to work faster.

None of it made any sense, though. There were too many holes in the whole "guard the Research Station" order. For instance, why was this station **â€** the whole **\*\*damned\*\*** thing **â€** made of Titanium-A, the very material used to make the hulls of all the UNSC starships, including Destroyers and Carriers? Why were there over two-**\*\*hundred\*\*** Marines on-staff to stop the Covenant from getting their alien fingers on the research held within the station, when there were still scientists in the lower levels fully capable of deleting all of it at a moment's notice?

Morris rolled his eyes. **\_\_Because it's not a damned "Research Station," you old fool. It's something else. It \_\_\*\*has\*\*\_\_ to be.\_\_**

"Sir," Hill said, snapping him out of his thoughts.

"Yes?"

"Bolding just got word from Delta and Zeta. All entrances are secured, for now."

The Captain smiled. \_Finally, \_he thought, \_good news.\_

"What do we do now, sir?"

"Well, Private," Morris said, reloading his sidearm and his Assault Rifle before taking a seat on the floor, facing the door. "We wait."

\* \* \*

><em>â€|and keep us safe. Be with Magnus, wherever he is and whatever tests are being done to him. Watch over us as we wage this war, in some attempt to cling to what we have left. Give us what we need to fight the Covenant, who are still waiting out there, crouched on our doorstep. <em>\_\*\*Please\*\*\_\_\_. Amen.\_

Samuel lifted his head to see Victoria and Zeke going at it with a pair of steel swords with hilts and blades identical to Covenant Energy Swords. The only difference between their little sparring match and a full-out battle was that neither the swords nor the blades on their armor were plasma-covered, and therefore, neither would be capable of getting through their MJOLNIR armor.

The ten-foot Spartan smiled and shook his head. They'd been at it for two hours, fighting in the parking lot. On some level, the dedication was admirable. On another, it was ridiculous, overzealous. The two of them simply never tired of fighting, ever.

That's all Samuel could remember from the past few days, really, was the daily routine the Spartans had developed. After Zulu Training Ground had been obliterated by the Covenant's Anti-Matter Charges, they'd had been taken via Pelican to a different military base, located in northern Arizona. The next day, after the funeral services, they were flown to yet another base, just outside the city of Las Vegas, Nevada. Now, they'd been there for four days, recovering, and a few of them appeared to finally be going stir-crazy.

In addition to Zeke and Victoria slicing at one another like a pair of Elites, Blaine and Stephanie had both been called in that morning to have a set of armor permutations done on their upper halves. Jason was asleep somewhere, Samuel believed, and Landon was off test-driving a few UNSC vehicles the Spartans had never seen while at the Training Ground, including a UNSC Cougar and Sparrowhawk.

Samuel sighed. It was true: he'd wanted just a couple days to relax after nearly being slaughtered at Zulu Training Ground. However, sitting still for four days was beginning to get to him. This base was made for standard Marines, **\*\*not\*\*** Spartans. Their gym didn't have enough weights to challenge a Spartan. The so-called "obstacle course" they had was easier than the one Samuel had done in basic, **\*\*before\*\*** his augmentations.

He shook his head and stood up. It was no use watching the two DNA-altered Spartans. They'd still be at it when he came back to the parking lot in a few hours.

\* \* \*

>"That all you've got?" his voice echoed inside Victoria's helmet. She took another swing at him, and Zeke barely dodged to the left. <p>"You know, you're really annoying when you're losing." She said. She heard him scoff loudly.<p>

"Well, at least I'm only annoying on rare occasion then." He said. "As opposed to **\*\*you\*\***, who seems to actually be **\*\*in charge\*\*** of the department dedicated to irritating me."

Victoria ducked easily, perfectly aware of the six centimeters she'd dodged Zeke's blade by. "Always the smart-ass," she said.

"Always."

She twisted to the right and parried his blade with the one on her left elbow, bending her arm so that his sword came up over her head. When he was exposed, she stabbed her own forward, but was surprised when the blade on his knee came up to block the shot.

"Oh come **\*\*on\*\***," he said mockingly, shaking his head as she drew back for another strike. "You at least have to **\*\*work\*\*** for it."

Victoria rolled her eyes. She lunged forward with her sword, purposely leaving her stomach open, but blocked with the blade on her left arm when Ezekiel went in for a strike. "You at least have to **\*\*work\*\*** for it." She said, mimicking his tone.

He mumbled something under his breath and swung the sword hard, hard enough that it would've dented the blade had it actually connected with her armor. At the last second, however, she ducked again, and the blade whistled by, cutting through the air inches above her head.

Victoria raised her right arm and brought her own sword down, but Zeke blocked it with one of his elbow-mounts. A second later, the wind was knocked out of her as he punched her hard in the gut.

She hadn't been expecting it and, as she recoiled, he stepped forward and thrust his boot into her stomach, sending her skidding across the parking lot. She got up, fuming.

"I didn't know we were using our hands." She said irritably.

Zeke shrugged. "Sure," he said sarcastically, "feel free to ban **\*\*any\*\*** form of combat if it makes your life easier. I'm **\*\*sure\*\*** the Covenant will oblige."

"You can be a real-"

"Bastard? Yes. I know. Thanks."

Victoria was about to respond when Samuel came running out to them from one of the buildings.

"You want a turn, Goliath? I'm getting bored out here." Zeke said, still focusing on Victoria long enough for his suit to relay the message to her.

Samuel shook his head. "We're getting new orders." He said. "Follow me. The others are already waiting for us."

Both Spartans dropped their "toy-swords" and walked toward the base, double-time.

\* \* \*

>Stephanie walked into the Las Vegas military station's mess hall clenching and unclenching her fists. She felt strange. The doctors had finished up her and Blaine's permutations only a few minutes before the Spartans had all been called down for their new orders, and she hadn't had time to get used to them. <p>The two cybernetic Spartans were told that their permutations would, in essence, only provide additional options to them in battle, and wouldn't hinder them, should they decide not to use them. There were two main adjustments: the first was a set of implants in their helmets that would enable them to see in infra-red to compensate for a loss of vision in darkened areas and against Brutes utilizing Active-Camouflage. Stephanie felt like there weren't enough of them to even warrant an implant, but according to recent reports, they were apparently being deployed far more often than before. The second, and more notable alteration, was one made to their breastplates and to their bodies as well.<p>

This specific permutation was similar to one utilized by the original Spartan III's. A chemical implant would inject high amounts of adrenaline into the Spartan's systems for sudden bursts of strength or stamina. The major difference between Zulu Company's alterations and those of the Spartan III's, however, was the inclusion of an energy-converting device that would divert energy from the Spartan's shields directly to the MJOLNIR armor's motor-systems. This would allow for an incredible burst of physical strength in the soldier's upper-body, second only to, **\*\*perhaps\*\***, a Covenant Hunter.

Thankfully, both of these permutations could be activated by the Spartan by using the neuro-implants in their helmets along with their primitive AI's. Until that point, they would be inactive.

\_Which, unless it's \_\_**\*\*completely\*\***\_\_ unavoidable, is \_\_**\*\*exactly\*\***\_\_ how they'll stay: inactive.\_ Stephanie thought. She wasn't comfortable with the idea of injecting massive amounts of adrenaline into her system for the sole purpose of getting a few seconds of Hercules-level strength. Not only that, but the idea of sacrificing her shields for that strength, the very shields that had single-handedly kept her alive a dozen times now, seemed ludicrous.

Sighing, she took a seat between Samuel and Jason as the Corporal walked in from a side-door to the mess hall. "Do you know what's in store for us?" She asked Samuel.

The giant shook his head slowly. "I have **\*\*no\*\*** idea." He said. "All I know is that it involves a lot of Covenant and the city of Los Angeles."

Stephanie's eyes lit up for a moment. "Los Angeles?"

Samuel nodded.

Suddenly, the permutations didn't seem to matter as much. Neither did the Covenant. Stephanie took a deep breath, trying, but failing, to keep her mind from wandering too far. She worked to keep from thinking about it, but found that she was powerless within her own mind. It had been over seven years. So many thoughts, so many memories were floating around in her head.

She was going to Los Angeles.

She was going home.

\* \* \*

>"I hope you all have enjoyed your days off." Corporal Charles said as he took a spot in the center of the mess hall. He looked around as the seven Spartans sat around anxiously. Then, he added, "because they are officially <strong>over</strong>."

That instant, seven pairs of eyes lit up eagerly, waiting for the next challenge. Charles understood, but he still couldn't fathom how much they loved the thought of a fight with the Covenant. To a Marine, days off were a blessing to recuperate from battle, spend time with his or her family, and just kick back and relax. To the Spartans, days off were if a necessary evil to regain their strength, nothing more.

He cleared his throat before going on. "The Covenant have taken the city of Los Angeles." He said. "There are literally **\*\*dozens\*\*** of Phantoms stationed at or around the UNSC Weapons Research Station, just off the coast. The station walls are one-hundred-percent Titanium-A and have held up to everything the aliens have hit them with so far." He paused, then added, "but they won't last forever."

At this, Charles heard the sound of someone's knuckles cracking. \_Either Zeke or Landon,\_ he wagered silently.

"What you should know is that this station is built in a cone-shape, with its greatest area at the bottom, where it sits on the ground. At the top, it's only about one-hundred feet in diameter. At the bottom, it's a two-mile jog from one side to the other."

Jason whistled loudly.

"The UNSC branch in L.A. is opting for an air-strike to level the whole area around the building. The station should hold up to a low-level nuclear strike just fine, but a pair of missiles will completely annihilate every alien in town." Smiling, the Corporal scanned the line of soldiers in front of him. "This is where you come in."

A second later, the line was plagued with puzzled looksâ€|except for Landon, of course, who was most likely simply jumping at the thought of flying a vehicle armed with tactical nukes.

"The Covenant have stationed four anti-air guns around the perimeter of the station. They're **\*\*massive\*\*** stationary weapons, and together, they've been able to blast everything bigger than a Hornet right out of the sky. The L.A. branch wants the seven of you to go in and take

them out." He thought about leaving them with that, but decided against it. "It's going to be **\*\*Hell\*\*** in there." He said. "All we really need is a pair of them destroyed. That should open up a window large enough to drop the bomb. Once we drop one, the other won't be a problem."

Samuel stood up. "So, our orders are simply to go in and take out the anti-air?"

Charles nodded.

"Damn," Landon said, "was hoping for a **\*\*challenge\*\***."

The Corporal shook his head. "Trust me, Landon," he said, "you'll get your challenge. Because of the AA Guns, we can't drop you off anywhere close to the station. You'll be dropped off in a ruined part of the city, where the dropship can get in low and avoid the guns. After that, it's gonna be a fight the whole way there. L.A. is **\*\*crawling\*\*** with those aliens. If I were you, I'd see what the UNSC has in the way of vehicles and try to accelerate your progress a little."

Samuel nodded, understanding. "Anything else we should know?" He asked.

"Just one thing: the Phantom will be here to pick you up in three hours. It's time for you to gear-up."

Instantly, Zeke stood up. "Did you say the '**\*\*Phantom\*\***'?"

Charles nodded. "Yes, I did. This time, I made sure that you'd have some help. The Elites are sending a few of their soldiers along with you, and you'll be meeting up with a squad of Marines when you land. There'll be twenty-one of you when all is said and done." He smiled despite himself.

\_Not \_\_**\*\*this\*\***\_\_ time,\_ he thought. \_They're not alone in it this time.\_

\* \* \*

><p><p>

"The Hell," Zeke snapped. "I'm a soldier, not some damned babysitter!" He threw his arm out and tagged the wall with enough force to dent the iron. "As if sending the Elites with us wasn't enough, he decides it's in our "best interest" to make us watch over a bunch of Marines?"

"Enough." Stephanie said. "We've fought with the Marines beside us before. They're perfectly capable soldiers."

Zeke rolled his eyes. "I **\*\*know\*\***," he growled, "but they're only **\*\*human\*\***. They can't keep up with you or me, or any of us, for that matter. And I refuse to slow down just to let them catch up. If you want to, you're more than welcome, but don't expect me to wait."

Stephanie opened her mouth to say something but, apparently, nothing came, because she closed it just as quickly. Zeke's smirk glowed with

an arrogance that earned him a glare from both the cybernetic female and Victoria as well.

He shrugged, and then nodded appreciatively as Samuel held the door to the Armory for him and the rest of the Spartans. Slowly, he stepped inside, looking for his weapons of choice. He saw Stephanie stalk off to another end of the room. Suddenly, as he approached a gun-rack, a large shadow overtook his.

"Samuel," he said.

"Do you **\*\*have\*\*** to do that?" The head-Spartan asked. Zeke shrugged again.

"Do what?" He asked innocently, reaching over and gripping a Sniper Rifle from one of the racks on the wall.

"**\*\*Zeke\*\***â€|" Samuel dragged the word out, making it all the more irritating.

"What?" Ezekiel snapped. "You want me to **\*\*apologize\*\*** to her? Fine, I'll go apologize." He sat the rifle back down and turned to walk over to the Cyborg before Samuel grabbed his shoulder.

"No, I don't want you to do that." Samuel laughed as he started to speak again. "Only because you are the **\*\*only\*\*** human being I know who could possibly start **\*\*another\*\*** fight with an apology."

Again, he rolled his eyes. "So then, what do you want me to do?" He grabbed two magazines of ammo for the rifle and stuffed them into the small bag he was carrying before moving again.

"Play nicely." Samuel said, following him. "Act like you actually **\*\*care\*\***."

Zeke stopped dead, almost dropping the Carbine he'd just picked up. "But I don-"

"That's why I said **\*\*act\*\***."

Zeke smiled and put down the Covenant Carbine. He lifted the rifle again, attaching it to the mount on the back of his armor. "Whatever you say, Goliath."

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: Well, that's it for this one. I'll try to have the next one out ASAP. I'm back to school now, so time will be a little...short...but, thankfully, we're off Friday of next week, so it should be done by that night, at the latest. Until next time, please leave me something to read, and tell me you're all still there...<strong>

## 27. Chapter 26: Los Angeles

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Well, here it is. I actually got it done a little earlier than I thought (and didn't end up doing with it what I thought I would...don't worry...it all just got bumped a chapter, not dumped). This one is just the entry into L.A. and the welcoming

committee.\*\*

\*\*First, however, reviews (the few that I got...thank you. All those who didn't review: please do so next time! I miss hearing from you all and, if you don't, I don't know if you're still with me)...\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: The Cougar and Sparrowhawk were more just for that chapter, as an example to show Landon's aptitude with seemingly-random vehicles. If I can, I'll include them somewhere, but trust me, there's not a whole lot of info on either of them, since they weren't included in the actual Halo trilogy. Thanks for your review though!\*\*

\*\*WolfyWolf: Well, things start up this chapter...stuff will get ugly next time, when they get...well, where they're going, lol. I won't ruin it for you. I promise though, there's enough action in here to at least keep you going for just a bit.\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: lol, Cory...you're scarin' me. ;) The funniest thing is...I don't think I apologized for the last one...although, I might have. Sleep's not important to me either, which is why I have no idea what I'm saying right about now. Thanks for your (really long) review, though! \*\*

\*\*Also, the Sparrowhawk is an airborne vehicle that (I think, correct me if I'm wrong...it didn't get run passed Gormanuyai, so...yeah) was supposed to be included in Halo 2 but was not because of time constraints. The Cougar, I believe, is to be introduced in Halo Wars for the 360 whenever it comes out.\*\*

\*\*Samson00: lol, we talked about your review, so I won't say too much, except, to clear anything up for anyone who might read: when I described the augmentations, I meant it to where their upper-bodies were biomechanical and not completely mechanical. The adrenaline shots that I described last time would be purely to give the muscles they do have up there a little extra "kick" to compensate for the enormous boost they'd be getting in the suit's motor-systems. Anyways, thanks man for the review!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Hey, thanks for the compliment. Personally...I HATE writing the info chapters. I know they need done, but they do not come easy to me at ALL, lol. But, hearing that I do a good job is always nice... :) As for the inclusion of stuff in this one...well, you're about to see 'em! Although, I'll say ahead of time that I didn't address Stephanie's return home much yet...that will come shortly. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: lol, I know you like the Elites. I hope you like the ones I'm starting to introduce in this chapter. They'll all have differing attitudes and "takes" on humanity, so please, I'd love to hear what you think.\*\*

\*\*BTW, is your story up yet? If/when you get it posted, PLEASE e-mail me or send me a message or leave it in one of your reviews, lol. I really liked your one-shot, and I don't want to miss it if you actually make a full-fledged story out of it. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*Now, to Los Angeles!\*\*



\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><p>

**\*\*Chapter 26:\*\***

â€" **\*\*Los Angeles â€"**

**\*\*1500 Hours - January 1, 2553\*\***

**\*\*Covenant Separatist Phantom - Just Outside of Los Angeles, California\*\***

Samuel sat silently against the wall of the Phantom, listening intently to the gold-armored Sangheili Field Master, J'rede Ahrmonro, as he explained the situation to everyone on the ship, including not only the seven Spartans, but the five other Elites as well. The ship had picked the Spartans up over an hour before, and as they approached Los Angeles, those inside grew more and more tense.

"The Brutes hold the entire area," the alien growled, showing the rows of sharp teeth hidden behind his four mandibles. "There are thirteen of us on this ship, and we believe there to be over eighty Brutes, just within the bounds of the city, commanding **\*\*legions\*\*** of Grunts and Jackals." He paused, spreading his mandibles. Samuel interpreted the action as an attempt at a smile. "These odds, for us, for the **\*\*Sangheili\*\***, might be enough to give us a decent fight."

Samuel watched as the five other Elites mimicked the "smile" of their Field Master without a sound.

No doubt, it was disturbing for him to ride in a Phantom with the same species that had slaughtered so many people, but, for some reason, Samuel didn't share the same contempt for them that a few of the Spartans did, specifically Blaine, Landon, and, of course, Ezekiel. These three had been giving them fits for the duration of the trip, and had only just stopped when the Field Master had started speaking.

"We land and meet up with the humans within the hour." Ahrmonro said. "Prepare. Today, we'll have our revenge for those that we've lost, by spilling the blood of the Brutes all over this city!"

Two of the Elites let out threatening, triumphant growls that bordered on a full-fledged roar, and Samuel, for a second, flashed back to the night when the power at the Training Ground had been lost, letting a group of three-dozen Covenant warriors run loose around them. He'd heard a similar roar then, and it had chilled him to the core.

Seemingly satisfied, the Field Master left the immediate area, proceeding into the front of the Phantom, where the Spartans believed a pilot to be monitoring the situation.

And, immediately, the rivalries started again.

"So, split-lips," Blaine said to the closest Elite, a blue-armored

Elite Minor, "how'd you get stuck with a squad of humans, since I know you guys hate us so much?"

The Elite snarled back, spreading its mandibles before making the same gesture from before in its own version of a twisted smile. "Not **every** member of our race hates you, human," the warrior said. "It's just that you're not worthy of the respect of **any** of us."

"Well, the day your respect means something to me, I'll probably turn myself over to the Brutes anyway, seeing how they did kick all of your asses right out of the Covenant." Arrogance dripped from the Spartan's voice in each and every word.

Each of the Elites, except one, a silver-armored Special Operations soldier, visibly flinched, and the blue-armored Minor Domo appeared to seriously consider making a lunge at Blaine.

And, as if on cue, Ezekiel, standing with his arms crossed in the corner, decided to chip in as well. "**Careful**." He snapped at the Elite when he saw the alien flinch. He took the Energy Sword off his thigh. "We're not quite as **fond** of you as you are of us."

At this, another Elite, this one a red-armored Major, stood up from his seat, clicking his mandibles and showing all four sets of teeth. "Are you threatening us, human?" The last word dripped from his mouth, filled with disdain.

Zeke shrugged. "Not at all," he said smugly. "I'm just making a point. After all, I wouldn't want us to have trouble getting along before we ever touched down." He paused, and then added, "You might need our help."

Irritated, but, unlike a couple of the Spartans, the Elite decided against arguing any further and simply growled lowly before muttering something that sounded to Samuel like "wretched human."

Samuel rolled his eyes, cursing himself for even letting it get this far. He saw Landon's head turn toward the Elites: the signal that he was about to jump in again. "That's enough." He said quickly, careful to get the words out before Landon could start things up again. He stood up to his full height, barely missing the ceiling with his helmet. The enormous Spartan added, "from all of you."

"You may be a powerful warrior, human," one of the aliens said quietly, but with a tone that would frighten a hardened soldier. "But you are **not** our Field Master."

"No," Samuel admitted, "I'm not. But I **am** in charge of the Spartans, **and** I'm thinking clearly enough to know that, if we don't at least attempt to form an alliance here, the Brutes will kill us all. Don't misunderstand me. I will **never** forgive what you've done to humankind, but I will put our differences aside for this. You need to do the same."

As the Elites growled lowly to themselves, more out of irritation than disagreement, Samuel focused on the Spartans, particularly the select few of them that were making trouble. "As for you," he said, looking right at Zeke and Blaine, "that's enough. Your antagonizing isn't fixing anything. All you're doing is causing problems." He took

a second to focus specifically on Ezekiel. "And **\*\*we\*\*** **\*\*talked\*\*** about this." He snapped.

Zeke nodded almost invisibly. "Fine," he growled bitterly. "I'll stay quiet, but it's under protest."

Samuel rolled his eyes. "It always is," he said.

\* \* \*

>Twenty minutes later, the Phantom descended, dropping its occupants off in the middle of a ruined Los Angeles street, with a few overturned cars, piles of rubble where an office-building once stood, and eight LRV Warthogs, most of them with a single Marine inside. The Spartans filed out first, with the six Elites close behind.  
<p>Instantly, one of the Marines stepped out of the nearest Warthog and ran up to the soldiers with a brimming smile on his face. "Glad to see you guys could make it." He said in a clearly southern accent. "I was beginning to wonder if help was still coming." He nodded an acknowledgment to the Elites before turning back to the Spartans. "I'm Sergeant Dylan Byers."<p>

Blaine scowled. He didn't like being dropped in the middle of a deserted street with purely minimal cover aroundâ€|especially when that street was in a city completely dominated by Brutes. **\*\*More\*\*** importantly, he didn't like being dropped in the middle of a deserted street in enemy territory with a happy-go-lucky superior officer who sounded like he'd come from some "happy-town" in Texas.

"We were told that the Marines had set up a military base here in the city." Samuel said. "Are we close?"

The Sergeant nodded, and then tilted his head backwards, motioning down the road. "It's just a couple of blocks down the road." He said, still smiling.

Blaine watched as the Field Master stepped forward, causing the Marine to flinch for only a split-second. "Lead the way." The gold-armored Elite said.

"You got it." Byers said, giving the Elite a 'thumbs-up' as he did so. This earned not only a clearly-visible look from the Elites, but also one from the Spartans, albeit it was hidden behind their visors. "We've got enough 'Hogs here for each of you to get a ride pretty easy." He pointed to the Warthogs, each of which had only a driver inside.

Before anyone could say anything, Blaine saw Landon step forward out of the mix. "I don't ride." He said, shaking his head. The Sergeant cracked a smile.

"I'm sorry?"

"I don't ride. I drive."

"Hell! Is that all?" Byers asked with a smile which, for some reason, still irritated Blaine to no end. He wasn't used to people being so **\*\*damned\*\*** cheerful, and definitely not during combat. "You can drive mine."

"Blaine," Zeke's voice suddenly echoed inside his helmet.

"Yeah?" he said, focusing on the other Spartan.

"Is it just me, or is this guy really, **\*\*really\*\*** irritating?"

Blaine let the edges of a smile appear on his face. "Nobody's that happy." He said. "It's a good thing he's a superior, for his sake."

"Alright," the Sergeant said, interrupting their conversation. "If that's all settled, we should really be gettin' outta here."

"Agreed," Ahrmonro said, making his first comment since they'd landed.

At that, the Sergeant led them to the Warthogs, and the Spartans all piled in. Blaine decided at the last second to ride with Landon and the Sergeant. Zeke and Victoria rode in another 'Hog, while Stephanie and Jason rode together. Samuel, being the most tolerant, rode with Ahrmonro. The other Elites rode in the remaining vehicles, and never once said anything loud enough for Blaine to hear.

The biomechanical Spartan gripped the mounted gun on the back of the Warthog as their little caravan started slowly down the street, toward the rubble of another building. He thought it was strange: the whole city was dominated by Brutes, but the majority of the buildings were intact besides a few broken windows or doors, and they'd seen no bodies of either Marines or civilians thus far. It was eerie, like a ghost town.

"Keep your eyes open." Victoria said from inside another Warthog. "I've got a bad feeling about this. It's too quiet."

No sooner had she said the words than something crashed through a huge window on the first floor of the building on the corner of the street. Blaine saw the huge, spiked wheels of a Chopper and immediately opened fire on the Brute-driven craft. Even with the turret firing dozens of rounds a second, however, it wasn't enough to stop the vehicle from charging through the nearest 'Hog, crushing it completely with its bulk and causing it to explode in a haze of smoke.

As the others turned to fire at the Covenant vehicle, it drove around them, disappearing around the corner of another building.

"Shit," Blaine said, looking at the smoking remains of the Warthog the Chopper had gone through. Thankfully, it was the only 'Hog with no Spartans or Elites as passengers, but it had had three Marines inside.

Before he could even think of mourning them, however, he heard the sound of the Chopper's engine again as it came barreling around another corner, this time toward Samuel's Warthog.

"Open fire!" The Sergeant yelled furiously, firing with his own Battle Rifle from the side-seat of the Warthog Blaine was in. That instant, a hail of bullets from seven mounted turrets impacted the

Chopper from all directions. As it exploded amidst the roar of the guns, Blaine noticed something on his radar: a large red dot approaching fast from behind. He turned around to see another Chopper charging down the street toward them.

"Another Chopper!" he yelled. Before he could say anything else, however, yet another of the Covenant crafts came blasting through a second-story window of the building on the corner. It hit the ground loudly and boosted straight for Zeke and Victoria's 'Hog.

Blaine heard Victoria mumble something foul under her breath before grabbing the Marine from the driver's seat and leaping out of the LRV. Zeke immediately followed suit, letting go of the gun and jumping off the back just before the Brute Chopper charged right through it, reducing it to scrap.

That same moment, everyone in Samuel's Warthog abandoned ship as well as the same Chopper set its sights on the next vehicle in line.

He knew there was time, so Blaine turned and unloaded over fifty rounds into the Chopper that was now nearly right on top of them. As the alien vehicle turned to hit one of the Elite-transporting 'Hogs, however, the bullets stopped hitting the bulky machine's engine and penetrated the driver's body, leaving the alien to fall to the ground in a bloody heap.

\_Where the \_\_\*\*Hell\*\*\_\_ did they come from?\_ He wondered as he spun around quickly to find the last Chopper. The others were unloading their own turrets on it, but the Brute driver was quickly working to get out of the line of fire. A second later, as the alien's armor finally shorted out, he rounded the corner and-

CRACK!

There was a metallic clink as the Chopper slowed to a stop, its driver slumped forward against the massive engine. Ezekiel re-attached the rifle to his back.

"Bastard tried to kill me." He said, shaking his head. "Son of a-"

Zeke never finished that sentence, because the driver of the Warthog that was carrying only one of the Elites suddenly screamed and exploded in a haze of blue plasma, and the sound of a Grunt cheering could be heard as Covenant soldiers started pouring out onto the street. They came from behind the rubble, inside the buildings, and a few of them were shooting explosives down from the second and third stories.

"Cowards!" Ahrmonro roared, pulling up two Plasma Rifles and leveling them at the nearest Brute. The Elite opened fire, depleting the soldier's shield-system in a fraction of a second and then laying into its flesh with the twin rifles.

The other Elites followed suit, each of them bringing their own weapons to bear and letting loose on the Covenant warriors that had come running into the streets.

"Spartans!" a voice called in Blaine's helmet. He recognized Samuel's tone in a second. "Take out the ones inside the buildings first!" The

giant pointed vaguely to the second floor of one of the buildings, where grenades from a Brute Shot were raining down like hellfire.

CRACK!

The grenades stopped as the body of a Brute Major fell limply from the window, landing gruesomely on top of the bayonet attached to its gun.

Blaine heard the roar of a Brute going berserk and turned around to see six of the aliens, along with a pack of Grunts, charging him from the building on his left. Only the Warthog stood between him and the dozens of spikes and plasma bolts they were sending his way.

At first, ducked behind the 'Hog, he was stunned at how easily they'd gotten so close to him, but, after only a second's thought, he realized his next move with a wicked smile. \_I've \_\_\*\*always\*\*\_\_ wanted to do this,\_ he thought as he pulled the huge Gravity Hammer from his back.

"Blaine! Look out!" Stephanie's voice echoed in his head, but he only smiled in response.

This was going to hurt.

He pulled the hammer up and behind his shoulder, holding it like a baseball bat and looked straight at the incoming posse of aliens. He let them get closer, until they were only ten feet away, and then laughed, "Hey! Freaks! \*\*Catch\*\*!" A second later, he swung the hammer as hard as he could into the Warthog, sending it flying at the aliens at over fifty km/h. It crashed into the Covenant group and kept going, crushing their armor and bones as it rolled over, bounced, and flew into the side of a building.

A moment later, he heard Landon's voice in his helmet. "\*\*\*Holy Hell\*\*!" he yelled. "You just threw a \*\*truck\*\* at 'em!"

\* \* \*

>Ezekiel found another Brute peeking out the third-story window of one of the buildings behind them and leveled the Sniper Rifle again. He was three-for-three so far, as far as shot-to-kill ratios went.  
<p>CRACK!<p>

Another Brute fell from its perch, hitting the ground bloodied and battered, with a dull thud. He ejected the empty magazine and re-cocked the rifle, preparing for the next shot. As he searched for a new target, he took a second to observe the battle.

Only a moment before, Blaine had successfully turned a Warthog into a cannonball, smashing a whole group of aliens and turning them into Covie-flavored mush. Now, however, Zeke was focused on the Elites.

He watched as one of them, a silver-armored, high-ranking Special Operations soldier, single-handedly fought off a trio of Brute Majors without even pulling out his Energy Sword. The alien ducked back and forth as the Brutes fired grenades and Spikers, then came up and let loose with a pair of Plasma Rifles. As soon as one of the Brutes'

shields was down, the Sangheili proceeded to beat the living Hell of the miserable primate, before moving immediately on to the next one.

It really was impressive, even to Zeke.

Suddenly, Ezekiel felt a chill go down his spine as a gold-armored Brute Chieftain made itself visible from behind the corner of a building and fired five rounds from its Fuel Rod Gun. Zeke wanted to yell the Elite's name, but he couldn't remember it. He'd never imagined he'd actually have to **\*\*pronounce\*\*** the damn thing.

As he did the only thing he could think of and took aim with the rifle, the five green bolts of plasma streaked toward the Elite, whose back was still turned to the attack. At the last second, and to Zeke's immense surprise, Landon came out of nowhere and put himself between the Sangheili and the plasma bolts. He braced himself and put both his arm-shields up to take the force of the blasts. The first shot hit the shield, and it held. Then the next—and the first of his two shields flickered and died.

The third hit his last shield, and its color didn't even falter. Then the fourth hit, giving his shield a dull red hue. Finally, the fifth shot connected, and the shield failed. The Elite turned around as Landon stood back up to his full height, breathing heavily but otherwise unharmed.

Ezekiel was stunned. Landon had just taken a hit and risked his life for one of the Sangheili. What the Hell \_\_\*\*for?\*\* He wondered as he zoomed in on the Chieftain with the rifle.

CRACK!

The first shot caused the Brute to stumble backwards a few steps before coming to a stop.

CRACK!

The second shorted its shields and knocked its ugly, odd-shaped helmet clean off. It saw him and roared in anger, but the Spartan ignored the ugly beast.

"Enjoy Hell," Zeke whispered.

CRACK!

The Brute fell to the concrete, first on its knees, and then onto its face, where it stopped moving entirely.

As he ejected the magazine from the rifle, Zeke turned to see something that scared him to no end: Jason was driving one of the 'Hogs around, splattering all the Covenant he could find. Stephanie was in the side-seat with a Fuel Rod Gun of her own, blasting anything unlucky enough to **\*\*dodge\*\*** the Warthog. Finally, as if that weren't enough, the Sergeant was in the back, manning the gun.

"Wow," Zeke mumbled, dumbstruck, watching them run down a pair of Grunts and blue-armored Brute Captain in their engine of destruction. One of the Grunts was run clean over. The other Grunt and the Brute

were both hit with the Fuel Rod Gun before being completely mowed down by the turret.

Ezekiel was smiling to himself when he heard a familiar sound that sent a chill up his spine. It was a quick, short sound that sounded like something that you'd hear in an old movie where "futuristic" weapons were involved. It was the sound moviemakers used whenever "energy" was fired from a weapon, which was something like a short, high-pitched noise, the sound of a laser.

Someone had a Beam Rifle.

As fast as he could, Zeke scanned the area, taking note of each Brute he saw as the Spartans and Elites wrecked havoc upon them. At first he couldn't find the Brute, but then, as his eyes flew by a red-armored Elite Major that was laying into a Brute Captain, the sound came again, and he watched as a purple-white beam flew into the Elite's helmet. Sparks flew for a moment and electricity trickled around him as his shields failed and he staggered back.

Immediately, Zeke brought the rifle to bear, but knew that there was no way he could hit the sniper before the next shot was fired, the shot that would surely finish the Elite. As he turned his head slightly, he saw a Brute Major inside a window level the Beam Rifle again and take aim.

For reasons he couldn't even understand, Ezekiel yelled "move!" at the top of his lungs, and the Elite looked up just in time to see the Brute before the gun fired. Unfortunately, the alien soldier couldn't move in time, and Zeke watched as the Brute fired the weapon.

The beam seemed to move in slow motion, and Ezekiel honestly wondered if he could've gotten to the Elite in time. However, the Sangheili caught a break, and Victoria Small leapt in front of him, taking the shot to her chest as she flung a Plasma Grenade at the window like a baseball.

A second later, the blue-white explosion drowned out an alien roar as the Brute fell from its position, its flesh still melting from the heat of the blast.

Zeke wanted to scream. That was **\*\*two\*\*** of his allies now, **\*\*two\*\*** that had sacrificed themselves in some way to help theseâ€|theseâ€|monsters. It was ludicrous.

He turned in response to another explosion, followed by another roar, as the other silver-armored Elite was struck in the abdomen with a grenade from a Brute Shot. The alien must have been hit previous to that, because his shields flickered and diedâ€|just before another Brute, a Captain, came up behind him and grabbed him by the back of the neck before flinging him to the ground.

Zeke sighed bitterly. He was going to have to play "hero" to one of these aliens.

He ran forward as the Brute closed distance on the Elite, shooting it once in the leg with its Brute Shot when the Sangheili warrior tried to get up. For some reason, this cruelty made Zeke cringe, not out of fear, but rage.



At the last second, when the Brute was less than three feet from the Elite who was still trying to stand, Zeke jumped up and landed directly between them, facing the Brute with a look behind his helmet that would've made a Hunter cringe.

The Brute staggered back, surprised, but not frightened. Zeke smiled.

It was time to fix that.

Smugness flooding from his mouth, he asked, "You know what the leading cause of death is among Brutes these days?" He paused for only a second, then yelled, "pissing me off!" At that, he bent his elbows and lunged at the Brute in fury.

As expected, the Brute raised its bayonet and took a massive swing at the Spartan's head. Ezekiel ducked and thrust his elbow viciously into the Brute's exposed gut, slicing a wide hole with the attached plasma-blade.

The Brute doubled over as Zeke stood up beside it. He took out a Spike Grenade, primed it, and sunk it into the alien's back, hearing the satisfying cracking of bones as he did so. The Captain, now without armor, sprung up, roaring in agony toward the sky, and Zeke thrust his boot into its chest, propelling it several feet back, into the side of a building. It stopped with its back to the wall, and the grenade went off, causing it to collapse onto the ground in a heap of mangled flesh and leaking blood.

As he was admiring his handiwork, Ezekiel heard the Elite moaning behind him. He turned and offered his hand to the fallen soldier.

To his surprise, the Sangheili nodded appreciatively, took it, and pulled himself up. "Thank you." He said as his shields came back online.

Zeke turned away from the alien. "Forget it." He said. But the Elite wasn't finished.

"I misjudged you, Demon." He said. "It appears I may have misjudged your race as a whole."

Zeke smiled behind the helmet. He'd been called a "Demon," which, to the Covenant, was the mark of a human warrior capable of inflicting casualties that were beyond measure—a warrior that was more than human. It was meant to be derogatory, but he took it as a serious compliment.

"You have earned my respect." The Elite finished.

Zeke scowled as he turned to face the alien, but said nothing.

The Elite let out a low growl that was neither angry nor threatening. It sounded almost like frustration. "I have not earned yours." He guessed.

"That's right."

The Elite shook his head. "You spared my life when you could have let the Brutes finish me." He looked over to the carcass of the Brute

against the building. "You have my respect, Demon. And, before it is over, I will earn yours."

Zeke scoffed. "Don't hold your breath." He said.

\* \* \*

>U'svere Rynorem stared for a few seconds in disbelief as the human they called "Zeke" stalked away from him, his walk quickly changing into a run as he found another Brute. The Special Operations Elite couldn't believe what had just transpired. <p>The same human that had been giving him and his brothers so much trouble on the Phantom had saved his life when he was struck from behind and crippled. Easily, the Demon could've let him die, and then taken the Brute, but, for some reason, chose not to.<p>

And then, when the honor of having the respect of a Sangheili was presented to him, he tossed it aside as if it meant nothing. This, at some level, made the Elite's blood boil but, on another, it made sense. The Sangheili had slaughtered so many of his kind, how could U'svere ever expect the human to hold him in any regard?

On the other hand, the others seemed to have no major trouble adopting the Sangheili into their forces. Their leader, "Samuel," while understandably untrusting to them, was still open to their ideas and their abilities. Of course, he'd had the pleasure of meeting with Ahrmonro, too.

J'rede Ahrmonro was the son of Parala Ahrmonro, a fiercely intelligent Elite who held the title of Oracle Master and served personally as counsel for the High Prophet of Regret. While Parala had retired the military and become more a civilian in nature, his son had quickly ascended the ranks, racking up hundreds of casualties in no time at all. In only a short while, J'rede had become a Field Master, commanding an entire army for the Covenant.

When the Civil War erupted between the Brutes and the Elites, he was one of the highest-ranking survivors, and had personally volunteered to take the fight to the Brutes on Earth by helping the humans. He was an incredible warrior, even among the Sangheili, and had taken on scores of Brutes with only his Plasma Rifles and his Energy Sword—much like he was doing now.

At the other side of the street, Ahrmonro and the Demon, Samuel, were taking cover behind the destroyed remains of a Warthog, covering one-another and taking out countless Covenant soldiers as they rounded the corner.

Suddenly, a group of three Brutes and a Jackal rounded the corner, and U'svere watched as the human motioned for Ahrmonro to move back. When he had done so, the human, Samuel, gripped the bottom of the vehicle and rolled it at the oncoming group. Three of the Covenant soldiers were squashed under its weight.

U'svere, finally having mostly recovered from his wounds, raised his own Plasma Rifles as he prepared to charge, but stopped suddenly, distracted by the sound of explosions, and someone yelling. Immediately, he recognized the sound as one of the humans, and female.

He turned to see one of the Demons sliding and rolling painfully across the street from inside one of the smaller buildings, bouncing into the side of a Warthog before coming to rest. Her indigo-colored armor had chips of concrete lodged into spots, and the path she'd been knocked into had patches of dented ground where she'd bounced.

"Victoria," had they called her?

A second later, he saw what had hit her as a Ghost came speeding out of the building she'd just come from. As it came toward her, he recalled that she was the same one that had saved Buno 'Tosarum, the crimson-armored Elite Major, only a few minutes before.

Putting his honor before his life, U'svere ran an intercept-course as fast as he could, firing his Plasma Rifles until they overheated, at which point he finally dropped them and raised his Energy Sword, roaring in rage as he came between the Covenant soldier and the human. The Brute driving the Ghost stopped only twenty feet in front of him. He was between the Brute and the Demon now, but he had no more grenades, and his sword wasn't going to do.

"Elite scum!" the Brute yelled, firing the twin plasma-cannons on the front of the Ghost. U'svere dove out of the way and heard the female groan behind him.

"Here," she yelled, and rolled an unprimed Plasma Grenade to him from where she lay. He picked it up and looked at the Brute as the Ghost stopped firing, praying to the gods that the beast hadn't seen it.

"What's the matter, ape?" U'svere said as he stood up, careful to hide the grenade. "We ran your packmates down like **\*\*dogs\*\***, and you can't do the **\*\*same\*\***?"

The Brute seemed to contemplate this for only a second before going into a mad rage, speeding the Ghost toward the SpecOps Elite at full boost and roaring the entire way. U'svere smiled, opening his mandibles wide and growling.

"That's right. Come on," he said as the Ghost came at him. At the last second, the Elite threw the grenade, sticking it to the front of the Ghost, and dove out of the way. The fuse expired, and the Ghost exploded behind him. He turned around quickly to see the Brute stepping away from the wreckage, angry, but unharmed.

U'svere clicked his mandibles as he pulled the Energy Sword to his chest and activated it, letting its brilliant blue-white light shine in front of him. The Brute drew back for a moment before pulling out a pair of small, one-handed weapons that the Elite didn't recognize.

The next few seconds were a blur. The Brute charged him, firing the two strange weapons one at a time. At first, they seemed to do nothing, but when U'svere found himself within striking distance with the sword, a shot from one of them tore his shields to almost nothing. As he lunged at the Brute, the second one finished his shields and hit him in the chest with a force reminiscent of the humans' Shotgun.

Thankfully, another shot never came, as U'svere was close enough and rammed forward with the sword, gutting the creature right there in the street. The Brute's internal parts spilled out of the gaping cut in its abdomen as it fell to the ground.

U'svere deactivated the sword and roared triumphantly before looking at himself, now feeling the full effects of the Brute's weapons. They packed a punchâ€¦a large one. He looked around, making sure that the battle was truly over. Sure enough, there were bodies of Brutes, Grunts and Jackals all over the street, and the burning frames of several UNSC vehicles only added to the sight. Not only that, but-

"Elite," a voice behind him said. It wasn't his kind. It was one of the humans.

The Sangheili turned to see the Demon from earlier, "Ezekiel," standing behind him. "My name is U'svere." He said, correcting the soldier calmly. "What is it?"

The human said nothing for a few seconds. Finally, he motioned to the indigo-armored Spartan, the female, who was being helped up by one of her comrades. "You've got my respect."

And he walked away.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: Well, that's it for this one. It's not 8,000, but I had a good place to stop. It's actually about 5,250 in word-count, so it should keep you busy for just a little bit. I hope everyone liked it. I know that there was particular focus on Blaine and (a lot) Zeke, but next chapter, it'll be much more "spread out," with Zeke only having one or two short moments (for those of you who don't like him).<strong>

\*\*In addition, for those of you who were disappointed with the battles of the Elites...they will get better. I'm trying to establish some "character" for them first, so that they're not just "mindless soldiers" like the vast majority of my Marines end up (sorry...it happens). Trust me, next chapter and the next few that follow, they'll become much greater characters. Although...I haven't decided whether or not I'm keeping any of them...so, if you like J'rede or U'svere, let me know...I'll see what I can do.\*\*

\*\*Also, I tried, this time, making each individual "segment" or point of view a little longer, because I was told things were kind of "unfocused." Because of that, the characters who got to tell the story (because I only had 4 points of view in this one, and one of them was Samuel's from the Phantom) got a lot of the action. I can keep doing it this way pretty easily, but it really depends on what everyone likes. Personally, I'm starting to like doing it this way, but I don't know how it will do when I have to split them up. Anyway, just let me know, if you would.\*\*

\*\*As always, read and review...I appreciate (and answer) each one I get, promise!\*\*

\*\*Until next week (when I pit them against a whole lot more)...\*\*

## 28. Chapter 27: The Swarm

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Hey all! Took me about a week to get this one out, but I like it okay. There's a lot of action, but I will warn you, I didn't get to the parts I thought I was going to hit this time around. I had a little "encounter" for the Spartans planned, but I wanted it to actually be worth reading...consequently, I have another chapter, lol. So, next time, for certain, I start the real vehicular homicide and various other enjoyable aspects of Halo we've all come to know and savor. For now...well, it's part action, part info...\*\*

**\*\*First, Reviews:\*\***

**\*\*WolfyWolf:** Glad that kept you busy, lol. You should know, I'll be keeping the Sangheili for a while. At least until the end of this segment, possibly longer, maybe even make an appearance way later on. Don't know for sure yet, but, rest assured, the next several chapters will feature our mandible-mouth allies.\*\*

**\*\*rebelbullit04:** First of all, thank you very much for the compliments on my story! I love having new reviewers to tell me what I'm doing right/wrong, and I like it even more when they're as courteous as you were. :) I appreciate the time you took to review, and I'm glad you like it so far. Finally, as a quick note, you said you served in the Army. I have a great respect for all of the Armed Forces, and I'd like to say thank you for serving us all. It means a great deal to me that I can write a story that someone who actually served will say I've done a good job on (especially when it's based on the military, if not futuristic military, lol). Thanks very much, and I'd love it if you'd continue to review when you get the chance.\*\*

**\*\*PandamanX:** Hey! Another new reviewer! As I said, I love having new people telling me what they think about this story (obviously, I like positive comments more, lol, but you know...). Also, I don't about having a "monster" of a story, but I do very much appreciate the compliments. The comment you made, regarding the Brutes destroying the vehicles...well, most of them. ;) And YES, I'd be very interested in having you review in the future, if you would. Thanks again!\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** lol, I am still trying to find out how I did something like this. ;) Really, I never thought (and still have trouble accepting) that my writing is actually very well-liked. But, if you wanna tell me what your story is about, I can give you anything that comes to my mind. Send me a PM, if you like.\*\*

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian:** lol, I'm glad you liked the Elites! I will warn you, there's not quite as much to do with the Elites (at least, from their point of view) in this one, 'cause of...well, you'll see later on. I promise though, two of them, specifically U'svere and Ahrmonro, will have larger parts in the following one. Also...I wish I could throw Warthogs too...I'd probably have WAY too much fun with it...but, you know. Thanks for all the compliments!\*\*

**\*\*TheHuntedOne:** WOW, you left a long one this time, lol. \*\*

\*\*A: Thank you very much. :)\*\*

\*\*B, C, D: I'm sorry. I like Zeke. I can't help it. He talks some in this one, but doesn't do a whole lot, promise. lol. And really, in this one, no one has a real "day in the sun," but next chapter will likely be LONG, and very spread-out. Trust me, I've got plans for your favorite character. :)\*\*

\*\*E, J, N, O: lol, you did get awfully far this time...lol. Maybe, at the end of my story, you should go to Z, to symbolize the end, lol. ;)\*\*

\*\*F: Gormanuyai is a friend of mine, and yes, he is my own personal Halopedia. All props for details go to him...all faults...I probably forgot to run by him.\*\*

\*\*G: Yes, a few of the personalities are based off of people I know. Samuel, Blaine and Ezekiel are the most closely-related three. Also, 1 way ticket will argue that Stephanie's original personality came from a girl I met, but...I had her personality picked out long before I met said girl, so...decide for yourself, lol. Landon and Jason are also slightly related to personalities of people I know. And yes, several people got to pick a few things out. For instance, did you ever wonder why Blaine's armor was white with a big red target on the shoulders?\*\*

\*\*H: As often as I can...but, with school and college-work (PSEO), lifting, FFA stuff (I'm an officer for our school chapter, for those of you know what it is), etc, I don't get as much time as I'd like. That's why my stuff gets out about once a week.\*\*

\*\*I: I don't do "love" stuff...I'm bad at it. I do rivalries. The fact that this one happens to be between a guy and a girl...well, it happens. lol. Stuff will change a bit toward the end, but...for now, lol, it is as it is.\*\*

\*\*K, L: Tell me if you like the longer parts if I keep them more as I have so far, and as they are now...suppose I give you my word that I won't repeat a bunch of stuff, lol.\*\*

\*\*M: Starcraft, from what I hear, is an awesome game. Unfortunately, I've never played. I have read and heard much though.\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the review! (wow, that was cool and LONG) :)\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: Glad you like them, Cory. I've tried to give at least a few them real backgrounds. I can't do it with all of them, obviously, 'cause then I'm like I was in the start: too many freakin' characters to keep track of, lol. But, regardless, I hope you like this one too. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Hey, glad you liked that one. I thought it was decent. As for the outside interaction...you're right, it's a necessary evil. I wanted Elites, and I wanted Elites with actual personalities, lol. Anyways, let me know if you like the length and such of these. Trying to keep them focused without, as TheHuntedOne said, repeating myself.\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hey man! Tried to fix the details a bit in this one

(there's not as much to be described, lol, but I tried to give a little better of a picture). There's not gonna be as much hostility in this one, but, as you know...a whole bunch of, well...a certain species. Let me know what you think! Thanks man!\*\*

\*\*1 way ticket: lol, YES, the Elite has Zeke's respect because Magnus would've likely tried to kill him. However, that's just Zeke's way. You know that by now. And yes, they are miserable strips of bacon, depending on which Spartan is talking, lol. (It's an inside joke, as she said...don't ask). Glad you like the focus and the dialogue. Tell me what you think of this one, please! See you tomorrow by the way!\*\*

\*\*P.S. - I may or may not kill Spartans during this section. Honestly, I really haven't decided yet. lol.\*\*

\*\*NOW, to the chapter:\*\*

\*\*

\* \* \*

><strong>

\*\*Chapter 27:\*\*

â€" \*\*The Swarm â€" \*\*

\*\*1700 Hours - January 1, 2553\*\*

\*\*Streets of Los Angeles, California\*\*

"Give me a quick rundown. What still works?" Samuel asked, walking up to one of the now-smoldering Warthogs. Clearly, this one's destiny went no further than the scrapheap.

Landon was examining the last of the Brute Choppers to see if it would still run. Sure enough, it was unharmed, except for where a single piece of ammunition from Ezekiel's Sniper Rifle had shot a hole clean through its driver from behind and then lodged itself in the upper-right-hand corner of the control panel.

"We've got one 'Hog and two Choppers." Landon said finally, taking a quick glance at the other destroyed Warthogs. "Everything else is completely \*\*fried\*\*." He double-checked, looking around for any vehicles he might've missed, but didn't find anything. He saw Samuel shake his head.

"How much further?" he asked the Sergeant.

Byers cocked his head, thinking. "Just a few city blocks," he said. "There's a considerable amount of damage in some spots, but it still shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes." For some reason, the man was still smiling.

"Demon," the gold-armored Elite, Ahrmonro, started, "I believe it would be best for us to get out of the open. The Brutes will not forget us. There will be more." As foreign as it was, Landon could still tell how serious the alien's face was. There wasn't an ounce of emotion anywhere in his entire body.

He watched Samuel nod in agreement. "Ahrmonro is right." He said. The giant Spartan turned to the Sergeant. "Can we get to the base if we travel through the buildings?"

Dylan Byers thought for a second, pondering the question, and then nodded affirmatively. "Yeah," he said almost joyfully, "it'll just take a few more minutes that way."

Landon chose that point to interject. "Samuel," he said, "what about the Warthog and the two Choppers?"

"Well, I would say leave them." The other Spartan answered. "It's not as if we won't have the necessary vehicles available at the base."

"We don't know that." Zeke said suddenly. "For all we know, there's nothing but a handful of Marines and some ammunition in the base. Hell, for all we know, the base could be **\*\*gone\*\*** by now." He paused. "You saw the force they just hit us with. Imagine what a similar troop could do a handful of Marines."

Landon wasn't a big fan of arguing with the leading Spartan, or any officer for that matter, but he wasn't big on leaving the vehicles behind either. He knew better than nearly anyone just how helpful the additional firepower most vehicles provided was, including the M41 Light Anti-Aircraft Gun (LAAG) that was mounted on the back of the still-running Warthog behind them. In addition to that, each Chopper possessed four 35mm Autocannons capable of tearing through even the toughest alien hides without so much as a hint of difficulty.

Plainly put, leaving the vehicles behind was ludicrous, especially when they could find so much use for the firepower. They were outmanned and outgunned—why the Hell wouldn't they use what they had?

"I never thought I'd say this," Landon said, "but Zeke's right. We need all the firepower we can get. I'll drive the 'Hog, if anyone wants to ride."

Samuel's demeanor changed, and he appeared annoyed for a moment, but quickly recovered if he was. "Fair enough," he said. "But things still need to go through me. You can take the streets, and we'll take the buildings, but I want to know if you see anything. I don't care if it's a red-armored Grunt with a broken Plasma Pistol. I still want to know."

Landon nodded. "Got it," he said.

"I call the Chopper." Zeke said, walking over to the one he'd lodged a hole in earlier. He hopped up onto the vehicle, revving the engine loudly.

Landon rolled his eyes. The Chopper was a great piece of technology, but there were too many flaws with it for his tastes. The steering was awkward or, as Zeke had very eloquently put it, "bass-ackwards". The cannons were powerful, but slow. And, as a topper, the boost was only truly effective against enemies that were directly in front of the craft. Anything short of that was getting a few bruises and



walking away.

"Alright," Samuel said, "who wants to drive the other one?"

To Landon's surprise, no one answered.

The giant Spartan turned to Jason. "You're not taking it?"

Jason shook his head. "I'm Landon's gunner."

Victoria was next. She shook her head.

"I'll walk." She said.

Samuel seemed to get frustrated. He went to Blaine and Stephanie, but both shook their heads. They too preferred the dirt.

"Well, I guess we're leaving it then." He said.

"Perhaps not, human," Ahrmonro said, turning to his Elites. "As contemptible as the Brutes' devices are, this one could easily be of some help to us, and what better way to mock the miserable primates than to mow them down with one of their own atrocious creations?" He paused as he stared down each of the Sangheili. "Buno," he said, stopping at the red-armored Elite furthest to his left, "you will pilot this monstrosity and show the Brutes that **anything** they can build, a member of the Sangheili can use to destroy them."

If the Elite was bothered by the decision, he didn't show it. "Of course, Field Master," he said.

Ahrmonro turned back to Samuel. "There you are, human." He said. "You have your pilot."

"Thank you," the Spartan answered. "Now, I guess we'll just get-"

"Quiet!" A voice yelled out. It was Victoria.

"What?" Samuel asked, stunned.

"Do you feel that?" She was perfectly still, looking up.  
"Vibrations," she added, "in the air."

Landon was puzzled. He didn't feel anything. Of course, Victoria had been genetically altered and had all sorts of quirks about her.

"What is it?" The Sergeant started. "What are you-?"

"Enough!" Zeke snapped, silencing the man. He turned to Victoria.  
"You smell that?"

She nodded.

"Hey," Blaine said. "What the **Hell** are you two carrying on about?"

"**Insects**," Zeke said, spitting the word out as if it had left a terrible taste in his mouth. "I smell insects."

"Insects?" he asked, puzzled. Ahrmonro interrupted.

"Drones," he said. "There are swarms of them patrolling this city." He looked to Zeke and Victoria. "You're sure they are insects?"

They both nodded.

The gold-armored Field Master turned to Samuel. "Demon, we need to go, **\*\*now\*\***."

"Alright," Samuel said, "just get the vehicles and-"

Suddenly, the area around them began to grow dark and a terrible humming began to echo in the air. In a few seconds, Landon could barely make out the sun behind a veil of flying Covenant soldiers in the sky. There had to be almost two-hundred of them, each one carrying either an alien Plasma Pistol or, worse, a Needler, capable of firing dozens of pointed projectiles that would lodge themselves in a person and detonate with enough force to break bones.

Landon winced. The vibrations of their wings were still causing an infernal humming that made the Spartan feel like his ears were about to bleed. He was stunned, looking up in awe at the enormous swarm that had flown above them, only to hover there, watching with their piercing yellow eyes.

And then, they fired.

\* \* \*

>"Go! There! Inside! Anywhere!" Samuel yelled at the top of his lungs, trying hard to get the Spartans to get out of the raining plasma and needles that were falling on them like a flood. Every Drone in the sky had fired at once, and, in an instant, the three Marines that were still alive, except for the Sergeant, had been mowed down and annihilated. The Elites and several of the Spartans had taken cover inside one of the four buildings that still stood in the street, each of their shields damaged on the brink of shorting out completely. <p>Unfortunately, two of the Spartans, Samuel and Jason, hadn't made it to the building. Samuel, somehow, had managed to crawl beneath the wreckage of a Warthog, curling up enough to barely be covered by its still-burning frame. Jason, on the other hand, had taken cover behind his arm-shields, which were quickly failing.<p>

"Samuel!" Stephanie's voice echoed in his head. "Are you alright?"

The giant Spartan felt the frame weaken as another thirty bolts of plasma connected with it and a few of them splashed across his shields. "I'm great." He said without an ounce of sarcasm. "Now does anyone have an idea?"

There was chatter on the other end of the suit's communications-links, but nothing Samuel could make out. He felt the frame start to bend.

"Alright," he said, cutting the talking on the other side, "get ready. We're coming inside." He waited a second, focusing on Jason.

"You ready?"

A green acknowledgment light blinked in his HUD.

\_Alright,\_ he thought, bending his knees and curling his legs so that, as he was lying on his back, his feet were holding up the frame at its center. He pulled the Spartan Laser from his back and tucked it against his stomach. "Here we go." He said.

The next three seconds seemed to take forever to pass. Holding down the trigger on the Spartan Laser and gathering all the strength he could muster as he waited for it to charge, Samuel tucked his legs in a bit further, prepping himself. After two seconds, he released, thrusting them forward with every ounce of power he and the MJOLNIR armor could generate. The burning Warthog flew into the air, spinning end-over-end as it approached the enormous swarm of insects above him. At the end of the third second, as the aliens watched it continue to turn in the air, Samuel felt the laser fire, kicking into his stomach as it sent a burning red beam of energy cutting through the 'Hog and dozens of the aliens as well.

Disregarding the pain in his abdomen, Samuel stood up as pieces of the now-shredded vehicle started to fall around him. He tucked the laser up against his side and took off like marathon-runner for the huge, three-story office-building the others were taking cover in. He watched the door open in front of him and stopped when he heard Jason coming up behind him. The giant ushered the other Spartan in the door, then followed him, and heard it slam shut behind them.

"Shit," Landon said, shaking his head, "thought we were gonna lose you out there."

Samuel glanced downwards, panting inside his helmet. "No," he said in between breaths, "it's fine. We're fine." He turned around to look at the door and the walls. They were steel of some kind, but definitely not military-standard.

He could hear them hissing as the plasma bolts from the Drones' weapons slowly ate their way through.

"How many were there?" He asked, trying to find a plan of action.

Blaine shook his head. "Probably a hundred and sixty," he paused, "maybe more."

"Can we hold here?" The Sergeant asked. Zeke scoffed, annoyed.

"Please," he snapped, "if the Brutes get here while those Drones have us pinned in here, we're as good as dead." He looked at the door, and Samuel could still hear the whine of plasma on the outside. "And they don't seem to be considering leaving anytime soon."

"The human is right," Ahrmonro interrupted, looking more at the Elites than the Spartans, "the Drones need to be disposed of, and quickly."

There were mumbles of agreement among the aliens, and then all attention went back to Samuel.

"Alright," he said, feeling the pressure of everyone's eyes on him, even through his visor. He was used to it, the pressure, but the feeling of doubt in making a decision for everyone never fully dissipated. "What have we got, weapons-wise?"

One of the Elites spoke first. "We have three Energy Swords, seven Plasma Rifles, a Needler and Covenant Carbine." He said.

Samuel nodded, turning to the Spartans. Before they answered, he noticed that, for some reason, he no longer heard plasma hitting the building on the outside. The Drones had stopped shooting, for the time being.

"We've just got the usual: a rifle, hammer, rockets, Fuel Rod Cannon, etc, nothing we can use against that many Drones." Jason said.

"Don't forget," Landon said, "there's also a LAAG out front."

Samuel had thought about that. If they could reach it, the LAAG could potentially mow right through the Drones. There wasn't any real cover to speak of, but the sheer firepower would diminish their numbers considerably. Unfortunately, if one of them so much as stepped outside, he or she would likely be obliterated in a few seconds by the raining plasma.

They needed the first strike.

"Landon's right." Samuel finally said. "We need a way to use the LAAG. But, that being saidâ€¦I don't know how we're going to get to it."

At this, one of the silver-armored Elites, U'svere Rynorem, stepped forward. He was bearing a small, cylindrical device, the contents of which were glowing bright blue. "This may be able to assist you with that, human."

Samuel stared blankly at the odd, glowing device. "What is it?"

The Elite clicked his mandibles loudly and Samuel thought he was attempting a smile. "Active Camouflage, Demon," he said. "It will conceal anyone who uses it from the eyes of those Covenant insects, or any other soldier, for that matter."

Samuel continued to stare at the small device as the Elite handed it over to him. It was so tiny, small enough to fit in his palm. He wondered how the contents could actually be useful in camouflaging someone, especially one as large as a Spartan. Still, he'd been shown thermal images of camouflaged Elites before, and it was true: they were almost invisible to the naked eye.

Now he just needed someone to go out to the Warthog.

"Who wants to give this a shot?"

Landon stepped forward without a moment's hesitation. "I'll take the camo," he said, "just as long as I get the LAAG."

Samuel nodded. "Fair enough," he said.

"What about what happens once he gets to the 'Hog?" Blaine asked. "There's no cover out there. That camo wears off, he's a sitting duck."

"Ah, but he's a sitting duck with a **\*\*very\*\*** large gun," Zeke corrected mockingly.

He didn't know what to do about it, but Samuel knew that Blaine was right. They needed some way to get the first strike in, and give Landon a few seconds of clear fire with the LAAG before the Drones started shooting back.

"This building has multiple floors, does it not, Demon?" Ahrmonro asked, interrupting the giant Spartan's train of thought.

"Yeah," he answered.

"If there are doors or windows up top," he said, "we can use our rifles and grenades to provide a distraction. While the miserable insects are busy returning fire, your teammate can finish them."

At that point, the Sergeant made his presence known for the first time in what seemed like hours. "If he goes," he said, "I'm goin' with him."

Landon shook his head. "You'll be more of a duck out there than me! You don't even have shields."

"You'll need a driver." The Sergeant said happily.

Samuel nodded. "Sounds like we've got a winner," he said, cutting off the chatter. Landon and the Sergeant walked over to the door in silence, though he was sure Landon was less than pleased.

Samuel motioned to a set of stairs near the back of the building and then led the way up. Upon reaching the third floor, he noticed that it was mostly a barren workspace, with only a few cubicles in the center. Apart from that, there were two doors on opposite walls that presumably led out to a pair of balconies and four windows on three of the four walls, including the one that would overlook the street.

Samuel stopped and turned around, counting his teammates. \_Oneâ€|twoâ€|threeâ€|\_

He was missing three Spartans.

Double-checking, he looked and saw the Victoria and Stephanie were present. So was Jason. Landon was supposed to be downstairsâ€|

**\*\*Where\*\*** is Zeke?" He asked bitterly. "And where's Blaine?"

"Right here!" a voice echoed from the stairs, and the two came walking up to the top floor. Zeke's rifle was in his hands, and Blaine was carrying what appeared to be two glowing Fusion Coils.

"Why are you carrying those?" Samuel asked. "And where did you get

them?"

"They were downstairs."

"Okay—so **why** are you carrying them?"

"I'm going to throw them."

The enormous Spartan nearly fell over. "What?" He asked, shocked.

"I'm going to throw them at the Drones."

Samuel shook his head. Blaine wasn't stupid. At least, he had never been in the past. "You know," he said, "there's no way on **Earth** you're going to be able to hit a Drone with one of those, much less hit one hard enough for the thing to detonate."

Blaine shook his head. "I didn't say I was gonna **hit** one."

Samuel heard the bolt click into place in Ezekiel's rifle.

"Hey, showoff," Blaine said, turning to face the black-armored Spartan, "think you can manage to hit one of these?" He paused before adding, "you've got, what, **four** shots?"

Ezekiel scoffed. "I could hit both of them," he said, "with **one** shot—if I thought you were **man** enough to throw them both without a rest-period." He leveled the rifle, looking carefully through the scope before lowering it again.

Samuel thought the idea through before finally nodding his head in approval. He'd let the two of them have their fun, provided it actually did something for the team.

"Alright," he said. He focused on Landon, who was downstairs. "Go whenever you're ready. Get to the 'Hog and then we'll do our thing."

A green light blinked once in the corner of his HUD, and he watched a yellow dot on his motion-sensor in the corner move slowly away from him and the group.

Suddenly, Samuel found himself wondering why the Drones hadn't just come into the building through the glass windows on the top floor. It would've been easy, and none of the Spartans would've expected it. Silently, he chalked it up to good luck and let his mind go back to the plan.

They had four windows and a balcony at their disposal. Blaine and Zeke would need the extra space on the balcony in order to toss the coils. Stephanie could take a window all to herself, and she could use her Fuel Rod Cannon instead of a grenade.

The rest of them would have to share the remaining three four-by-four windows.

"I'm ready," Landon's voice echoed in the Spartan's head. "Let's get this show on the road."

"Alright," he answered. "Don't fire until you see our shots."

"Yes sir."

Samuel turned to the others. "On the count of three," he said.

All of them, including the Elites, nodded slowly.

"Oneâ€|"

Every lock on the windows was undone as they were lifted. The glass doors to the balcony were flung wide open.

"Twoâ€|"

Suddenly, the terrible humming of the wings of over a hundred Drones could be heard as they all took flight from the walls of the street, gathering into an enormous cloud right in the middle.

"Three!"

Samuel, along with six Elites and a single Spartan, primed and threw Plasma Grenades into the enormous cloud. He watched as two of them fell through, apparently dodged by the airborne soldiers. The others stuck.

At the same time, five enormous bolts of streaming green plasma arched through the air from Stephanie's window, connecting with Drones and exploding in massive haze of pure energy that engulfed dozens of the insectoid aliens, only interrupted by the intermittent explosions of blue plasma from the detonating grenades they'd thrown.

"It's like the 4th of July out there!" Jason yelled.

Drones were falling out of the sky by the dozen when Samuel turned to the balcony to see Blaine finishing a full spin, holding both of the fusion coils. The first one he threw back-handed as he turned. The second, he threw a split-second later as his 360-degree spin ended.

He watched Ezekiel level the rifle, and the genetically-altered Spartan seemed to take an eternity to aim. Samuel glanced at the two coils, which were flying through the group of Covenant soldiers.

CRACK!

For a fraction of a second, Samuel could see the trail of smoke the Sniper Rifle's bullet had left in the air, but it was soon covered up as not one, but **\*\*both\*\*** of the cores detonated in the middle of the swarm of Drones. Two explosions, slightly larger than those of the grenades, seemed to devour the majority of the remaining insects, who either burst into flame or simply fell in charred bits to the ground below.

Still, however, the left over Drones totaled at least forty, and they were all flying straight for the windows.

"Landon!" Samuel yelled as the insects flew closer, firing even as they did so. "\*\*\*What\*\* are you \*\*doing\*\*?"

"The LAAGâ€"â€"\*\*\*jammed\*\*!" He yelled back, static cutting in and out of the frequency. "It's freakin' jamâ€"â€" There was a brief pause, "â€"â€"\*\*\*amn it\*\*!"

Samuel ran to the nearest window, slamming it shut so hard that it nearly shattered. The Elites and Spartans followed suit, and they immediately took off for the stairs.

"What the Hell!" Zeke yelled. "What's wrong with the turret?"

They hit the stairs to the first floor, and there was a crashing noise as the windows and doors upstairs all shattered. The buzzing could be heard again.

"No idea!" Samuel yelled. He was vaguely aware of Stephanie stopping behind him.

Blaine was first to react. "What are you doing?"

Samuel turned as she hefted the Fuel Rod Cannon. "I've got six more shots." She said. "I can get rid of most of them."

Before anyone could object, a huge group of the insects appeared at the top of the stairs, and Stephanie let loose. The five green bolts covered the distance in a second, streaming through the air and-

They \*\*missed\*\*. The Drones flew out of the way of the blasts, and they detonated harmlessly at the other end of the third floor. Samuel felt the floor give way at the other end of the building and heard crashing sounds as one floor's ceiling crashed through its base.

"Shit!" Blaine yelled, grabbing her arm and practically \*\*tossing\*\* her down the steps. "That worked \*\*wonders\*\*!"

They reached the bottom of the stairs and Samuel rounded the corner first, leading the way to the door. Unfortunately, upon reaching it, he realized that Stephanie's shots had done \*\*something\*\*: they'd caused the ceiling of the second floor to collapse in some places, thereby causing that floor to collapse.

Of course, right in front of the door.

He knew that the Spartans could move the rubble, but not before the Drones reached the bottom of the stairs. Samuel looked around. There was a huge display-window at one end of the wall. \_Why didn't the Drones ever hit it?\_ He wondered. He was beginning to think that they were never trying to get in at all, only waiting for reinforcements to arrive while making the Spartans think they were pinned down.

Before he could suggest it, however, the swarm of Covenant fliers came buzzing down the stairs, and the air was sizzling with bolts of plasma from their pistols. As if that weren't enough, dozens of small, pointed needles were flying in their direction as well. Jason



immediately ran to the front of the group, putting up his shields.

"Get out of the way!" Victoria yelled, pushing him clean away from her. She pulled a device from her armor and dropped it in front of them. A second later, the Bubble Shield activated, and the twelve soldiers were all hidden underneath its protective glow.

And no sooner had the shield come up than hundreds of bolts and needles ricocheted off of it, burning the floors and walls.

Samuel watched as the Drones landed on the walls of the building, waiting patiently for the shield to fall. It was creepy, he thought, how they just waited, like an animal would stalk its prey.

A few seconds later, the Bubble Shield started to blink and shoot sparks, and Samuel knew its time was almost up. There'd be nothing for them to do once it was gone. They didn't have the weaponry. The Plasma Rifles would do some damage, maybe even take a lot of the Drones down, but **\*\*not\*\*** in time to save their lives.

"Alright guys," Jason said, "I'm thinking, if we get out of here, we should-"

CRASH!

Samuel turned as the huge display-window shattered. Instantly, dozens of bullets were being sprayed throughout the room, bouncing off the Bubble Shield while it stood for its last few precious seconds and shredding the Drones to slivers. The LAAG continued firing even after the shield dropped, and Samuel felt a few stray shots hit his shields and even nick his armor.

That was nothing, however, compared to the amount of blood and body-parts littering the floor. The Drones had literally been shredded to **\*\*nothing\*\***, their bodies not but puddles of blood and broken exoskeletons.

The Sergeant drove the 'Hog up to the group of Spartans and Elites, smiling widely. "I **\*\*told\*\*** you I could drive!" He yelled as he turned around to face Landon, who was on the gun.

The cyan-armored Spartan hopped down from the LAAG, cracking his knuckles calmly. "I never **\*\*said\*\*** you **\*\*couldn't\*\*** drive." He said. "I just noted that I'd never **\*\*seen\*\*** you do it, and asked you politely not to crash." He paused, and then motioned to the window, "which you **\*\*did\*\***, by the way."

Samuel cracked a smile, but remembered suddenly what the Elites had mentioned earlier: the Brutes wouldn't forget them. They'd be coming for them—soon.

"Let's go." He said. "We've still got to reach the base."

\* \* \*

>Twenty minutes later, the Spartans walked onto the street that the Marines had set up a base on, inside one of the buildings. To the left was what appeared to be a large, two-story supermarket that stretched from one end of the street to the other, easily over

one-hundred yards. On the right was a similar building, except that this one appeared to be the remains of a school. It was made of old-fashioned brick and concrete, but was reinforced in some areas, particularly near the doors, with titanium armor-plating.

Stephanie walked slowly, trying to take everything in. She knew she should be focused on the Covenant, but she just couldn't fully concentrate. This was her home. This was the very place she'd been snatched from so many years ago. Hell, the school that the Marines were now hiding in was once **hers**.

And, because of it, she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to everyone. Were her parents still here? Had they moved? Had something happened? The Covenantâ€¦had they found them?

Her thoughts were interrupted as a lone Marine came out of the school to meet them. He saluted the Sergeant crisply before turning to the Spartans. "Our company is in there." He said. "We've got weapons, ammo and supplies, should any of you need it."

"Sounds great," the Sergeant said. "Lead the way."

The Marine nodded and led them to the entrance of the school: a pair of glass doors reinforced with titanium-plating. The doors swung slowly open, and the soldiers were led inside.

Immediately, Stephanie took note of everything she saw. The entrance they'd come through had taken them directly to the cafeteria, which had four doors leading into it. Two of them led to halls inside the school. The other two led outside.

In addition, one wall was nothing but a row of enormous windowsâ€¦all of which had been plated with titanium to keep the Covenant from just strolling in.

As for the inside of the room, there were sandbag-bunkers twenty-feet from each of the four entrances. Each of them had two mounted turrets and four Marines stationed there, two of them carrying Assault Rifles, another carrying a Sniper Rifle, and the fourth carrying a Battle Rifle.

Besides that, there was what appeared to be a central-control in the middle of the room, which was essentially just a big bunker, clad in titanium and with two computer-systems inside it. There were four Marines inside that Stephanie could see, including a particularly well-decorated soldier that Stephanie guessed was a Captain.

As the Marine led all of them to the center, the man turned to them and nodded affirmatively to the Sergeant, then to each of the Spartans, and finally to the seven Elites.

"My name is Captain Malcolm Burns. I'm the commanding officer here in the city." He said. "Word on the street is that you guys have gone through Hell to get to us."

"Yes sir," Samuel said, "that's a pretty good way to put it."

"To Hell and **back** is more like it," Zeke mumbled.

The Captain smiled slightly. "Well, I'm glad you made it. The thought of your help being on the way is all that's kept this group going for

the past nine hours."

At that, Stephanie glanced around. Sure enough, while she hadn't noticed it previously, each of the men inside looked downright exhausted.

"We've been on constant alert for two days now. Our old base was three blocks from here, but those Covie bastards found us, and they just charged right in. This building is a little better-protected than the last one, and a **\*\*little\*\*** more subtle, but, if they find us, I'm guessing we get the same treatment as last time."

"You were attacked?" Samuel asked, "how many?"

The Captain shook his head, contemplating. "At least sixty," he said, "without counting the Covenant vehicles and reinforcements." He paused. "I lost fourteen men there. We were trying to get out, and-"

"Sir!" another Marine ran up behind the Captain, frantic. He turned around quickly.

"What is it, Richards?"

"The Horde is coming back!"

"What?" The Captain looked genuinely stunned. "The same one?"

The Marine nodded quickly. "They've passed us **\*\*already\*\*** today, sir. They shouldn't be coming back yet."

"Alright," Burns said, "calm down. They're probably just stepping up the patrols since they found out the Spartans got here."

The Marine seemed to calm a bit, but was still shaking slightly. Stephanie could tell the exhaustion plus this newfound pressure was really, really getting him.

"What 'Horde' are you talking about?" Blaine asked suddenly. The Captain shook his head.

"The Brutes have three huge attack-squads we call 'Hordes.' They're each made up of two Mortar Wraiths and an Anti-Air variation, several Choppers and Ghosts, a few Prowlers, about a half-dozen Banshees, and two support-Phantoms."

"Holy **\*\*Hell\*\***," Landon said. Stephanie heard Ezekiel whistle lowly.

"And that's not even counting the foot-soldiers and snipers that they employ along with them." The Captain added.

Zeke snapped to attention. "Snipers?" he asked.

Burns nodded. "Yeah," he said, "Jackals."

Suddenly, Stephanie heard an explosion in the distance, outside the base, and the ground shook slightly. At the same time, another Marine came running up to them. He was out of breath and shaking.

"Sir, the Horde is inbound! We were outside and one of the Wraiths just shot one of our defensive bunkers straight to Hell! They know we're here; ETA in less than twelve minutes." The man was beyond scared. He was positively frantic.

"Damn it," the Captain said. "We have to get out of there. We can hold off a normal scouting party just fine, but these Hordes will clear us right off the face of the Earth."

"Hold it a second," Ezekiel said. "What's the point of having a military base set up if you're just gonna pack up and **\*\*leave\*\*** when the Covenant come?"

Stephanie winced as she watched the Captain's demeanor change from someone who was at least maintaining **\*\*some\*\*** kind of a positive attitude, to one similar to that of Blaine's after someone made a crack about his family.

"What are you saying, **\*\*Spartan\*\***?" He asked bitterly. "You think we're cowards or something for leaving here? We don't have shield-systems or super-speed. We're **\*\*actual\*\*** people."

Stephanie watched as both Blaine and Ezekiel took an aggressive step forward, but Samuel cut them both off. "What Zeke is trying to say," he said carefully, trying to cover for the abrasive super-soldier, "is that, as Spartans, it's not **\*\*in\*\*** us to leave. We can't. We were trained with the goal to take the fight **\*\*to\*\*** the Covenant, and, if given the chance, we're going to do just that."

The man seemed to consider Samuel's words for a second before nodding his head, smiling again. "We **\*\*can't\*\*** fight them." He said. "We don't have the armor or the speed or the power. The last group that tried to fight off one of the Hordes, A-Company, was completely **\*\*annihilated\*\***. They're nothing but **\*\*ash\*\***."

"But," Victoria said, stepping forward, "did they have seven Spartans and six Sangheili soldiers to fight with them?" She motioned to the rest of them with her hand, and the Captain's smile grew a little larger.

"No," he said as a look of realization spread over his face. "No they didn't."

"Sir, ETA in nine minutes! Brutes are inbound!"

"Alright!" the Captain yelled, getting the attention of everyone in the room. "We've got a change of plans, Marines! No more running! We're staying right **\*\*here\*\***! If those wretched alien bastards want this city, they're going to have to take it the old-fashioned way! To your stations, men! Get ready for the fight of your lives!"

There were a few mumbles of disagreement, but they were drowned out by the loud cheering of the majority of the Marines in the base. Within a few seconds, everyone was running around, loading their weapons and reinforcing the doors.

"Okay," Samuel said, seemingly satisfied. He looked at the Captain. "We need weapons, the bigger, the **\*\*better\*\***."

Burns nodded. "We've got Rocket Launchers, Sniper Rifles, Spartan

Lasers, Fuel Rod Cannons and some other **\*\*great\*\*** toys. Tell me what you need." He waited a second before adding, very seriously, "just remember: I **\*\*already\*\*** know how this battle plays out without you guys. I've seen it. If you can make the difference, I'm all for murdering those monsters where they stand, but, if **\*\*not\*\***â€|I don't want to see that again. You don't know what it's like, to loseâ€|to lose **\*\*everyone\*\***."

Samuel stepped closer to the Captain until he was only a foot away and hunched over so that he wasn't towering over the man quite as much. "Trust me," he said sternly, "that's our job. We **\*\*are\*\*** the difference."

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: Yep, so, next time, we've got the Covenant's veritable war-machine on the way. I promise large guns, tanks, Chopper-to-Chopper action, hand-to-hand combat in the base, and much, much more (maybe split up into two chapters for length...we'll see)!<strong>

**\*\*So, in the meantime, review for me please and let me know what you think and if you have any ideas for me! Thanks again for all the support!\*\***

## 29. Chapter 28: Heavy Metal

**\*\*Author's Notes: Hi everyone! I really do apologize, but I have a semi-decent excuse this time. For one thing, this chapter was finished a while ago, but, as you'll notice, it doesn't cover the ENTIRE Covenant Horde battle...if it had, it would've been several thousand words more than what it is (meaning...above 10000, easy). Instead, since the last half or so wasn't done, I elected to split it in half and post the other half within 48 hours of this one for you all.\*\***

**\*\*That being said, I would've had this posted 48 hours AGO, except that FanFiction adamantly refused to load the Document Page for me...I just got it to load this morning, and now, this evening, I have the chapter for you all. Again, provided FanFiction does not fail me again, I will have the next chapter for you all by Friday or, at the absolute latest, Saturday. But, most likely, it will be up tomorrow evening.\*\***

**\*\*Now, moving on, and assuming you all can forgive me for the delay, here is the section we've all grown accustomed to, REVIEWS!\*\***

**\*\*Reviews:\*\***

**\*\*WolfyWolf: lol, "bass-ackwards." I've actually said that, so...yeah, it was a "familiar" term. Also, the school mentioned in these chapters is based loosely on the lower-grade schools I attended. Thanks for your review!\*\***

**\*\*Lord Of The Trees: lol, thanks for your compliment on the fight scenes! I certainly enjoy those more than any other. Anyways, here's the Horde I mentioned, up ahead...I hope you like what goes on!\*\***

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** lol, glad you enjoyed it, Cory! As we talk at this very second, lol, I say I hope you like this one!\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey, sorry I couldn't exactly "update soon," but FanFiction is responsible for most of that...anyway, here's your answer to their survival! Thanks for the review!\*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** Yeah...that was a lot of Drones, but I had to find SOME way to make a battle with them interesting. ;) Up ahead though is the Horde, and things are gonna get ugly. Thanks for reading, as always!\*\*

**\*\*rebelbullit04:** Thanks very much for your compliments about the story. It really does make my day to read all these positive reviews from people. Also, on the compliments I left...you're very welcome. :) \*\*

**\*\*Samson00:** Hey man! I don't know about a "new par," but thanks for the compliments! I guess you kinda already know some of what's comin', but still...lol. Hope you like! Thanks for reading it through for me (twice?). ;) \*\*

**\*\*Nameless Destruction:** Well, I can't make any promises on anyone's survival...ever...but, for now, you have my word that at least some of the Sangheili will make it through...some of this "segment" of the story. ;) No, but really, I intend on keeping them here for a while, no worries. Thanks for the review!\*\*

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian:** Thanks for your compliments on this last one! People took to it much better than I thought they might. Glad you liked those lines too...really, I'm just glad SOMEONE said something. ;) I wanted them to be the "taglines" for the chapter, but you were the only one to come through and say something for me! lol. Which was your favorite, you think??? Anyways, here's the next one for you!\*\*

**\*\*1 way ticket:** lol, I figured you might not like that one as much, since it was more fighting than anything. You might not be a fan of this one either, then...but I hope so. And yes...the Horde should be afraid. ;) Thanks for reading!\*\*

**\*\*Lord of Purple:** New reviewer! lol. Hi, new reviewer! I'm always happy to have another person start giving me input on this story. The more, the better. Not for the numbers, so much as it tells me what I do right and what could be improved. Anyway, thank you very, very much for the compliments on the story and my writing. I assure you, I'm nowhere near "novel-writing" level, but I do appreciate it.\*\*

**\*\*Also,** to answer your question...Magnus will not appear in this "segment" of the story. He will appear in the next one, however. I'm sorry he's been gone for so long...it's part of my pre-made storyline. There's a method to my madness...most of the time. ;) Anyways, thanks for reviewing, and I hope you'll stick around!\*\*

**\*\*PandamanX:** First of all, regarding Ahrmonro...I'm really glad SOMEONE mentioned whether or not it was done well. You'd be surprised how nerve-racking it is to try and write from an alien standpoint

when you don't have a full feel for how they think/react to everyday things. But thanks very much for that.\*\*

\*\*As for Zeke and Vic...lol. I guess it kinda was like that...I'm not opposed to "funny" though. ;) And, in regards to the informational chapters...those are the ones I have the most trouble with. It's not always that I think they're horrible...it's just that they seem that way 'cause they're so hard for me. Just a weird quirk of mine.\*\*

\*\*Finally, in answer to your question: yes, I have the story mostly mapped out. I basically have an outline and an idea of most of the major events. So, I guess, most of what you read isn't at all random. It's there because it somehow fits into my "Grand Order." But, at the same time, it's not mapped out to an absolute science, either. For instance, I never thought the Drones would have their own chapter...it ended up longer than I had anticipated. That answer your question okay?\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: And my last reviewer, who actually emailed me a review because the internet wasn't working! Thank you very much! Ha, bet you thought I wouldn't answer you, huh? ;) I'm glad you liked the Fusion Coil idea...a friend helped me perfect that little bit. Thank Samson00 if you feel like it. :) Anyways, thanks for your review, and I hope your computer allows you to do the next one more easily!\*\*

\*\*Now, after so long, on with the story!\*\*

\*\*

\* \* \*

><strong>

\*\*Chapter 28:\*\*

â€" \*\*Heavy Metal â€"\*\*

\*\*1800 Hours - January 1, 2553\*\*

\*\*Streets of Los Angeles, California\*\*

Lurrebus drove the Chopper slowly around the corner of the two streets, looking for any sign of the humans in the fading light of the evening. Along with seven other Chopper-driving Brutes, he was leading the rest of the attack group through the city. Behind him, two Mortar Wraiths were slowly preparing to come around into the next street as well. And, behind them, was their lone Anti-Air Wraith.

And, behind \*\*them\*\*, eighteen lazy, Ghost-piloting Grunts were barely keeping pace. Lurrebus scoffed. It was only because of the eight Choppers and three Prowlers on their asses that the Grunts even bothered to stay that close.

The Brute Captain could hear the air above him whistling quietly as the six Banshees that were a part of their group flew out in front in an attempt to find the humans' military establishment that one of the Jackals had alluded to earlier.

Slowly, he hit the end of the street and made a right turn into yet another barren road, this one almost identical to the last except for small variations in the buildings. On his left, a huge, two-story building took up the entire street. It was one the humans called "department stores." Every wall on the second floor was made almost exclusively of glass windows.

And the humans are supposed to be intelligent, Lurrebus thought.

On the right was another building. This one was three stories tall and was what the humans referred to as a "school." Something about it stood out, however. Lurrebus slowed his Chopper to a stop.

The same metal that covered the humans' warships was coating parts of the school. Even though several buildings had had last-minute shielding added to them when the Brutes arrived, this one seemed different. The armor had no chinks in it. It was added recently.

"Rottius," he said to the Brute Major piloting a Chopper beside him, "the last human resistance we destroyed—how far was it from here?"

The Major cocked his head, causing his dark-blue armor to reflect the dim rays of the evening sun. "Not far, Lurrebus," he said, "a quarter-mile, by human standards."

"Of course," the Captain grumbled, squinting behind his helmet to get a good view of the school. He turned to the Brute Major. "This is it." He said. "Get th—"

BOOM!

Out of the corner of his eye, Lurrebus watched as two red beams of energy engulfed the leftmost Mortar Wraith, devouring it and leaving only a smoking pile of scrap a moment later. The Brute turned to look to the source of the beams: the top of the school.

"Demons!" he yelled. There were at least two of them up there, on the edge, holding a pair of huge cannons on their shoulders. Before he could give another order, however, the Banshees turned ninety-degrees in midair to attack them and any other humans on the roof.

Just as their Plasma Cannons started firing, Lurrebus watched as eight projectiles came flying from the roof, leaving smoking trails in their midst. Seven of them impacted the Banshees, and three of the crafts exploded in a haze of smoke. Two of them fell in burning pieces down onto the street, but one managed to crash into another non-injured flier first, causing them both to spin in loose circles as they crashed into the roof of the department store opposite the school.

Lurrebus heard one of the Chieftains roar out in rage behind him. He turned to see the gold-armored Chieftain, Gortalus, walking toward him.

"How many are there?" The Brute roared.



Lurrebus growled. "I do not **\*\*know\*\***."

"Kill the Demons! Kill them all!" The Chieftain snapped back. "And do it **\*\*now\*\***!"

Lurrebus started to answer, but was interrupted as the very ground around him seemed to spontaneously explode. He looked up to see that a group of three humans and yet another Demon had fired over a half-dozen rockets down into the front of the attack group. In the midst of the attack, two more red beams of energy identical to the last two seared the air to his left, hitting the other Mortar Wraith and completely destroying it as easily as they had the first.

As Choppers and Ghosts detonated all around him, the Captain got the feeling that there was more wrong than what was being shown to him. The humans had planned somethingâ€and it was working. The Brutes' attacking force was being demolished.

Finally, the humans stopped firing, and Lurrebus looked around in an attempt to assess the damage. In reality, it could've been much worse. Out of the original sixteen Choppers and eighteen Ghosts, twelve Choppers were still intact and only one of the Ghosts had been destroyed. Of course, both of the Wraiths were also obliterated in the attack, and four Banshees had been lost as well.

\_Still,\_ he thought, \_it could've been worse.\_

No sooner had the realization come to him than Lurrebus heard the sound of a Brute Chopper's engine behind him. Normally, in a squad full of them, this would mean nothing, but this engine wasn't just running, it was revving. It was **\*\*boosting\*\***.

Out of nowhere, one of the huge windows on the second story of the department store shattered and another one of the Demons, clad in black armor, came flying out onto the street in a Chopper of his own. Without a moment's pause, the Demon boosted straight through one of the remaining Choppers, crushing it beneath the enormous, spiked wheels of his own.

Still not stopping, the Chopper-driving human ramped over the fallen Wraith and wiped out a pair of Ghosts before speeding down the street and rounding the corner. Gortalus roared again, furious.

"I want the Demon dead! Bring his corpse to me!" He said. Immediately, six of the remaining twelve Choppers sped away to follow the Demon.

As they left, the two undamaged Banshees came back, flying in low and raining fire down on the humans located atop the school. Lurrebus could hear them yelling as huge, green bolts of plasma exploded against the rooftop.

"Send in the first Phantom." Gortalus snapped behind him, seemingly to himself. Lurrebus knew better, however, aware that the Chieftain had a pre-established link with the operators of the two dropships.

A second later, the first of the two Phantoms flew in low over the roof and opened its side-hatches, letting two-dozen Brutes jump down onto the building, armed with everything from Spikers to Fuel Rod

Cannons.

"Good," Lurrebus mumbled to himself, "now those pathetic humans will see the true force of the Jiralhanae!" He glanced around, but stopped suddenly when something caught his eye at the end of the street.

There, in a large, eight-story building at the far end of the street, was yet another of the Demons. This one was clad in all white armor except for large red circles on his shoulders. He was behind a big, glass window on the second story.

"\*\*Another\*\* Demon," Lurrebus growled, enraged. These days, it appeared that the Demons were becoming as abundant as the rest of the humans.

A second later, the white-armored soldier jumped through the glass, shattering it and landing solidly on the ground in the middle of the street. At over a hundred yards away, Lurrebus couldn't even make out the Demon's weapon.

"Another one!" the Chieftain roared behind him. "Kill it now!"

As the Brutes tried to mobilize, however, Lurrebus heard another window shatter off to his right, in the department store. He turned just in time to see the huge spikes of a Chopper coming down fastâ€¦straight for him. He tried to roar, but his voice was drowned out by the Chopper's propulsion system and the crunching of his own bones beneath its front wheel.

\* \* \*

>Blaine stood ready in the middle of the street, watching patiently as the Elite they called "Buno" ran straight through the group of Covenant soldiers with his stolen Chopper. The Sangheili warrior rode right over a Brute Captain, missed the Chieftain, but made up for it by blasting through a pair of Ghosts before getting off the Brute-made craft and bringing his twin Plasma Rifles to bear. <p>The biomechanical Spartan, on the other hand, was prepared to wage his own war. He had a Rocket Launcher with four shots in it and a Gravity Hammer on his back, albeit a hammer with a battery at only about 30-percent. In addition to that, he was carrying all the grenades he could pack and a piece of equipment the Marines called a Power Drain.<p>

Plain and simple, things were about to get really ugly.

"And here's my first customer." The cybernetic Spartan said with a smile as a single Ghost came careening toward him from out of the group of Covenant. The rest of them, it seemed, were preoccupied with trying to get into the school.

The Grunt driving the Ghost was a red-armored one and, if Blaine didn't know better, he'd say the thing was \*\*smiling\*\* as it engaged the Ghost's boost-system and charged him, laughing madly. That was about to change, though.

When the Ghost was less than twenty feet from him, Blaine quickly grabbed the hammer from his back and held it high above his head.

The response was immediate. The Grunt driver yelled out and tried to stop the Ghost, but it was too late: he was far too close already. As Blaine readied the hammer for his first crushing blow of the evening, he saw several more Ghosts start to move from the group toward him.

The Spartan smiled and smashed the hammer straight down, onto the Ghost and its driver, smashing them both and then sending them flying away from the sphere of altered gravity the weapon had created on impact.

A second later, he heard the cry of another Grunt. "What A-hole gave him a hammer?" The alien screamed frantically, not seeming to know whether to charge him at all.

There was a Chopper coming in hard from his left, however, and the driver had no qualms with charging him. Only once the Chopper was so close that its driver activated the vehicle's boost-mechanism, Blaine held the hammer over his left shoulder and swung it sideways like a baseball bat again, sending the huge craft rolling across the street and flipping end-over-end into a particularly unlucky Ghost-driving Grunt. The two vehicles collided and exploded in the middle of the street, their detonations causing so much chaos that even the Chieftain at the other end of the road seemed lost for a moment.

Blaine checked the hammer. \_One more good hit in it,\_ he thought. It was depressing, really. He'd wanted to do a **\*\*lot\*\*** more damage with it before switching weapons.

"Die, Demon!" A Grunt's voice echoed from his right as the creature started firing the Ghost's twin Plasma Cannons.

Blaine smiled beneath his helmet and ran straight for the Ghost, holding the hammer high above his head like he was brandishing a flag. The Grunt panicked and stopped shooting, instead trying to turn the Ghost around and flee, screaming as it did so.

"Don't forget your parting-gift." Blaine said, priming a Plasma Grenade and winging it at the Ghost as it turned around. The grenade stuck right to the Grunt's methane tank.

"No! No-no-no! **\*\*No\*\***!" The alien screamed frantically. "Bad thing! **\*\*Very\*\*** bad thing! Very bad-"

BOOM!

The grenade detonated, its blue explosion engulfing the Grunt and its vehicle in a cloud of gas and flying metal.

Blaine grinned silently, watching the devastation. A second later, he became aware that yet **\*\*another\*\*** Chopper was coming for him.

"Good Lord," he said irritably, "you freaks are slow learners."

This time, he didn't bother blasting the Chopper away from him with a sideways swing of the hammer. He didn't bother doing some fancy trick and sticking the driver with a grenade. No, this time, Blaine simply turned around and slammed the hammer down on the Chopper's engine as

hard as he could, flattening pieces of it and stopping it dead in its tracks. The Brute Major driving it got out immediately, roaring in rage.

"That's right Bo-Bo," Blaine mocked, "come and get me."

The Brute roared again, louder this time, and charged the Spartan. It took all of two steps before Blaine thrust the handle-end of the hammer into its forehead. It wasn't enough to impale the creature, but it did cause it to recoil and fall over backwards, howling in pain.

"Hmm," Blaine mused as he looked at the hammer, "even with no battery left in it, I might **\*\*still\*\*** keep this thing."

"Stupid human!" the Brute yelled as it stood up. It came at him again, this time raising its arms high above its head. It raised them up and ran forward, roaring and-

Blaine smacked it in the ribcage with the handle again and heard bones crack. The alien stopped dead in its tracks, howling in agony. The cybernetic Spartan didn't wait though; he thrust the handle into the Brute's gut, causing it to hunch over, coughing up crimson blood.

"Oh, did that hurt?" He asked with a tone flooded with false concern. Quickly, he added, "**\*\*Good\*\***!" and plunged the handle into the Brute's foot. Before the beast could even respond, he flipped the handle up, smacking it in the chin, leaving it facing the sky as it continued to cough and gag on its own blood.

At that, Blaine had had enough. He twisted to the right and then snapped back with the hammer, first smacking the handle into the Brute's cheek, and then sending a crushing blow to its skull with the head of the hammer. The alien was sent skidding across the ground for several meters before it came to a stop.

The Spartan was looking at the hammer, admiring its power even without a battery, when he heard a familiar sound behind him: another Chopper. He scowled. No longer did he have the power of altered gravity to fend off the stupid things.

"Oh well," he said, dropping the huge mallet and putting the Rocket Launcher on his shoulder, "no matter."

When he could hear the Brute boosting behind him, Blaine turned 180-degrees and immediately fired the launcher. The rocket took all of a fraction of a second to impact with the Chopper, detonating with the engine and sending pieces of it in all directions.

Blaine stood completely still and felt the wind from the explosion blowing around him as the huge frames of the spiked wheels flew inches from his face, skimming just over his shoulders. As the overpressure surged across his visor, he calmly cocked his head to the side to avoid another foot-long piece of shrapnel that had come flying off the Brute vehicle, ready to impale him without a second's notice.

The Spartan could hear the Grunts and Brutes that had seen what he had just done to their fellow soldier.

They were **\*\*screaming\*\***.

"So," he yelled, motioning to the launcher, "who wants me?"

Almost as if it were in response, eight Ghosts came rushing out from behind the remaining Wraiths toward him, boosting for all they were worth.

"Shit," Blaine said. He hadn't counted on **\*\*quite\*\*** that many. "I could've dealt with six." He turned and ran back to the office-building he'd just jumped out of a few minutes before and jumped first on top of a wrecked car, and then back through the same window he'd come through, immediately taking cover behind a nearby wall as all eight of the Ghosts let loose their Plasma Cannons.

Blaine silently cursed himself as he reloaded the Rocket Launcher. He hadn't counted on getting quite that many Covenant interested in him. Still, it posed an interesting challenge. He thought of all he had on him: a few grenades, the rocketsâ€|and the Marines' Power Drain.

\_I wonder,\_ he thought, bouncing the blue electronic ball in his hands. \_I wonder what this thing can do.\_

He stood behind the wall, contemplating it for a moment as he listened to the whining noise of the Plasma Cannons. Finally, he smiled and gripped the ball in his right hand. "Oh, what the Hell?" he said to himself, and broke from his cover.

The next few seconds were some that Blaine wouldn't forget. Without even another glance, he rounded the corner and jumped out the window he'd used twice already, leaping clean over the squad of Ghosts beneath him, but dropping the Power Drain on them as he did so.

The incredible little device started emitting a huge sphere of blue energy that stopped all the Ghosts in their tracks and caused the Grunts to yell and scream obscenities as they tried to get their vehicles running again. Blaine landed a few feet outside the sphere with his back turned to the eight Covenant soldiers.

He smiled and pulled his last Plasma Grenade from its slot on his armor. Looking at it, he wondered for a second whether or not a rocket would be a better choice to make sure that the Ghosts were taken care of.

Blaine shrugged and shook his head, listening happily to the sounds of the screaming Grunts behind him. He primed the grenade and threw it casually over his shoulder as he began to walk away.

"No!" one of the Grunts yelled suddenly. "Not **\*\*again\*\***!"

Blaine grinned as he counted the seconds down in his head.  
\_Threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|\_

\* \* \*

><p><p>

BOOM!

Victoria watched through a window on the third story of the school as the Plasma Grenade detonated in the middle of the group of Ghosts. One right after another, the Ghosts began to explode, first of their own accord, and then multiple times after igniting the grenades their Grunt drivers had been carrying. In a few seconds, nothing remained of the eight vehicles and their drivers but a half-dozen smoking holes, burnt and twisted metal, and a few scattered pieces of the Grunts' corpses.

"\*\*Hell\*\* yeah!" Landon yelled through the communications-link. "Now \*\*that's\*\* what I'm talkin' about!"

CRASH!

"Vic!" Samuel said behind her, "they're coming in again!"

Victoria nodded, bending her arms slightly and letting the blades on her elbows activate, suddenly glowing with blue-white energy. She ran in front of Samuel and watched as the door at the end of the hall flew open, spilling seven Brutes out into the passage, all of them waving around their Brute Shots and Spikers.

"I got 'em," she said, grabbing the Energy Sword from her thigh and taking off for the group. She vaguely heard Samuel and Jason behind her, no doubt objecting to her "reckless" behavior, but she didn't care. There were only \*\*seven\*\* of them, after all.

Just as the aliens reached the middle of the hall, she leapt forward, working carefully not to hit the ceiling as she jumped over their heads and landed in the middle of them.

The reaction was instant: each of the seven Brutes tried desperately to stab or slice her with both the big and small blades mounted to their weapons. Victoria only smiled behind her visor, parrying the strikes with the mounted blades on her arms and the Energy Sword. Once, she even went so far as to bring her knee up to block a vicious attack from a Brute Shot.

That was one thing her augmentations, no matter how strange, had been good for: the entire \*\*world\*\* seemed to move slower than she did. These Brutes, while they were swinging with all their might, would have to work a lot harder to hit her as long as she was at her best. She couldn't dodge bullets or plasma shots very well, but physical attacks? She'd gotten a lot of practice with Zeke, and if \*\*he\*\* couldn't catch her, they sure as \*\*Hell\*\* weren't about to.

\_This isn't any fun at all,\_ she thought as she blocked a pair of Brute Spikers that were flying toward her back—without even turning to face them. Bored, she ducked low and spun a full circle with her arms bent inward, the result being that the two mounted blades made cuts across the legs of each of the four Brutes circled directly around her. As she stood up, listening to them roar, she gripped the ends of two Spike Grenades mounted to her armor and stuck them into the walls on either side of her.

"Time to go," she mumbled, bracing her legs before doing a back-flip and landing on the outside of the circle of still-howling Covenant. Just as they began to turn to face her, the grenades went off, sending superheated spikes flying between the two walls and shredding

them into nothing more than piles of gruesome confetti.

As she walked back to her teammates, Jason shook his head. "That wasn't even right." He said. "You're too damned fast for your own good."

Victoria smiled. For now, it appeared she was **\*\*just\*\*** fast enough for her own good.

"Guys!" another Spartan's voice echoed in her ears. "We need help on the first floor! They're coming in!" It was Stephanie. Landon, herself, and two of the Elites were the ones assigned to hold the bottom floor.

Samuel cracked the knuckles on one of his enormous hands. "We're coming down. Hold on."

As Victoria turned to run for the stairs, he stopped her. "No," he said, "you stay here and handle whatever's left from the dropship. I'll take Jason downstairs and I'll send you one of the Elites as backup."

Victoria nodded. "Sounds great," she said sarcastically, "except that last part—why do I need backup?"

Samuel shook his head. "Just keep them from raining down on us, okay?"

"You got it."

"Good," and he smashed his foot into the floor, shattering it and making a hole big enough for himself and Jason to jump through.

A second later, Victoria was left alone in the hall, waiting for more.

"Well, this sucks." She whined, looking at the far door. The Brutes had just sent in a group of seven, and there had been one group of eight before that. That meant that there were no more than ten more still on the roof and doing God-only-knew-what. Victoria didn't like that.

She glanced out the window overlooking the street to get some idea as to how the battle was going out there, but instantly wished that she hadn't.

Blaine was backed up into a corner by two Prowlers that were getting air-support from one of the Banshees. He still had the Rocket Launcher, but didn't look like he knew which one to shoot.

The Elite Major, Buno, was trying futilely to fight hand-to-hand against four of the Brutes, two of which were gold-armored Captains. Victoria watched as one came up behind the Sangheili and backhanded the alien into another of the Brutes. That one simply grabbed the Elite and held him still as one of the Captains came up behind him and stuck a Spike Grenade deep into his back.

"Buno," she said, watching in shock as they flipped him onto his back. "No—"

The Elite struggled for a moment to stand up, but the Brutes only watched him, mocking him as he tried so desperately. A second later, the grenade exploded, and his entire upper-body was shredded in the spikes. The Brutes laughed even as a few of the spikes nicked their armor, leaving deep scratches and cuts.

"Buno!" she yelled, enraged. Subconsciously, she activated the Energy Sword still in her hand. "Brutesâ€|" she said lowly, "you're gonna pay for that."

Still watching them, she silently cursed herself and the situation. She'd been instructed to stay and keep the Brutes from coming in from the roof. She **\*\*had\*\*** to stay. But she didn't want to. She wanted to jump clean out of the window and go slit the throats of the four Brutes that had just mutilated one of her allies without so much as one **\*\*hint\*\*** of honor in the kill. They'd ganged up on him. They'd hit him in the back.

Her fists clenched tighter until the Energy Sword felt like it would snap. The Brutes were going to pay for the blood spilled today. Even if it took her the rest of her life, she was going to avenge every human and Sangheili lost.

"Bastards," she whispered under her breath. "You just better hope Blaine or Samuel gets to you before I do."

\* \* \*

>"We can't hit 'em!" The Marine on one of the turrets yelled as he continued to pelt the doors to one of the hallways leading from the cafeteria to the outside. The Brutes had bypassed the security out there and run in through the hall. Barely, a few of them had gotten close enough to slam one of the two titanium doors shut and use it as cover, peeking out only long enough to fire a few shots or wing a random grenade. <p>"This is ridiculous!" Stephanie yelled as dozens of rounds continued to splash across the door and the wall. She walked over to the Marine, holding two Fragmentation Grenades in her hands.<p>

"What is it?" He asked, still not taking his finger off the trigger.

"Give me that!" She snapped, prying his hands from the turret and promptly ripping it from its mount.

"Woah!" he yelled. "What are you-?"

"Here!" She said, pointing at his hands and handing him the grenades. The man lost it.

"I can't beat them with these! I need a gu-"

"Just throw them at the wall!" She pointed at the open door. "Bounce them around the door when I say so."

The man started to object, but stopped when Stephanie raised her hands up. She motioned once more to the door and started running toward it.

"Alright," she said mostly to herself as she approached the big,



titanium door. She turned around to face the Marine and made a throwing motion with her arm.

The man reared back and flung the first grenade at the wall beside the door, barely throwing it hard enough to bounce it around the side. A second later, as the first one exploded, he threw the second one, which made it around much easier and detonated on the far side.

As grey smoke billowed around the door, Stephanie took a deep breath, walked the last few steps and kicked it wide open, pulling and holding the trigger on the turret as she did so. The moment the door was open, dozens of shots echoed through the narrow hallway, absolutely shredding the seven shocked Brutes on the other side.

When the last one fell, she let go of the trigger and let the gunfire die down. Once it had, she heard something she hadn't heard before. It sounded like someone screaming; a female—and young.

\_What the Hell?\_ She wondered, listening to the noise. There were no words, just screaming, from down the hall. She could hear someone crying too.

"Sergeant!" she yelled back into the cafeteria.

The man turned her way. "What is it?"

"Are there any civilians in here?"

The Sergeant stopped cold, his eyes growing wide. "Oh **\*\*shit\*\***!" He yelled. "There was a woman. She came in looking for a place to hide. We put her in the south wing!" He froze for a moment, then added, "she had a little girl with her!"

Stephanie didn't wait any longer. She turned and ran down the hall as fast as she could, passing over a dozen wooden doors before she got to the end of the hall, which formed a large 'T.' She looked left just in time to watch a little girl, no more than eight years old, run into an open classroom. A woman, her mother, ran in behind her and slammed the door shut just as a gold-armored Brute Captain charged around the corner.

The alien looked at the locked door and grabbed a Brute Shot from its back, pointing it at the entrance to the room.

Stephanie ran toward the creature as it fired the launcher once, blowing the door right off its hinges. The little girl screamed again.

"Come here!" The Covenant soldier yelled, and Stephanie lost it. She sped up, running as fast as her legs could possibly go, and yelled at the top of her lungs as she approached the Brute.

The alien turned toward her just in time to be **\*\*tackled\*\*** by the world's angriest Spartan. Stephanie ran straight into the Brute like a football player, her momentum lifting it off the ground as she ran. In a blinded rage, she ran straight through the brick wall of the school, carrying the huge alien with her.

With bricks cracking and breaking around her, she crashed right through and came out into the street, dropping the Brute on the ground in front of her. As the alien tried to stand, she lifted it up by the chin, but then promptly turned and slammed it, face-first, into the road they were standing on.

She stood there, panting, until she heard Samuel's voice sound in her ear. "Stephanie," he said, "where **\*\*are\*\*** you?" His voice was full of tension.

Slowly, regaining her composure, she answered, "I'm outside. I'm coming back in."

"You need to get in here **\*\*now\*\***!" He said. "We've got Brutes trying to get in through the doors on all sides!"

"Coming," she said, and ran back in the way she had come, speeding down the hall toward the cafeteria. She didn't see the girl or her mother in the hallways.

A half-minute later, she stormed into the cafeteria with her Fuel Rod Cannon on her shoulder. The first thing she noticed was a woman and her daughter hiding behind one of the bunkers.

She couldn't help but smile. They were alive solely because of her.

"Stephanie!" Samuel yelled, pointing to one of the halls on the opposite side. He was manning one entrance while Jason worked at another. The three Elites that had been in the room before were now gone as well. "They're coming in!" He said.

Without a word, Stephanie took off for the other entrance, where the titanium plating was already starting to bend inward from the power of whatever was hitting it on the other side. Just before she could get there, the Marines trying to hold it were flung to the sides as the door flew inwards, a series of blue explosions detonating just outside.

Over a dozen Brutes all came barreling in, firing Spikers and Brute Shots and throwing grenades madly the entire way. Stephanie stopped, bracing herself as one of the grenades from a Brute Shot hit her in the stomach.

For some reason, the same anger that had been present only a few minutes before took over her once again, causing her eyes to glaze over slightly and her breath to come in short, shallow gasps. She fired the Fuel Rod Cannon five times, letting the huge green bolts of streaming energy devour most of the group of alien soldiers.

Before the chaos had even died down, however, Stephanie dropped the Covenant weapon and charged into the pack of Brutes with nothing but her bare hands. She ran blindly into the green haze until she felt resistance, and then punched the Brute in front her so hard that flew backwards into its packmates. Still not stopping, she groped around until she felt something "a wrist" and pulled the Brute toward her before crushing the bones with her hand and flinging it away from her, into the wall.

Finally, the smoke cleared, and Stephanie stood in a ragged circle of

the torn, broken alien bodies of the Brutes who had tried to enter. She stood there, gasping for air, not out of fatigue, but pure rage. Something had snapped inside her. Seeing that child and her mother running in fear had changed the situation. She wasn't just fighting the Brutes now. She was going to kill them all.

\* \* \*

>"Come on, freaks!" Ezekiel yelled as he felt the Chopper boost again, speeding up and launching him over the top of a pile of rubble. He'd been on a driving spree for a while now, and the Brutes appeared to be gaining little ground, if any. <p>He reached the end of the street and turned a hard right, killing his momentum but giving him a few seconds' cover from the 35mm autocannons that were mounted on each of his pursuers' vehicles.<p>

Suddenly, he saw a multi-leveled parking garage at the far end of the street, on the right, and got an idea to put a stop to this pointless chase.

He slowed down and waited for the first of the Choppers to round the corner behind him before hanging another hard right, into the garage. By the time they came in after him, he was already zooming up the ramp to the second floor.

"That's right, you stupid primates," he yelled back. "Catch me if you \*\*can\*\*!" He sped up and zigzagged around the debris and rubble as he searched for the ramp to the next floor.

Zeke could still hear the Choppers below him, even after he'd gone up two more stories. Accelerating again, he found himself on the top floor of the garage, four stories above the ground.

"Alright," he whispered, finding a car that was still parked at an edge of the garage. Conveniently, while there was a two-foot barrier that surrounded the garage so that people couldn't simply back right out of the building, there was no wall above that, and the car would do nicely for what Ezekiel had planned. He angled the Chopper toward it and waited until he heard the Brutes coming up behind him.

Over the loud engines of the Choppers, he could make out one word the Brutes were chanting: Demon.

"Here goes nothing!" He yelled, driving forward and pulling on the front of the Chopper with all the power his MJOLNIR armor could muster. The big, spiked wheel came off the ground for a split-second, just long enough to roll on top of the car and boost over it like a small ramp.

There was a terrifying, yet exhilarating sense of vertigo as the Chopper seemed to fly on its own, through the empty air. Looking down, Zeke realized that he was over an abandoned construction site that extended for almost fifty yards. Beyond that, however, was open road.

As the Chopper started to angle downward, weighed down by the heavy engine in the front, Zeke pulled as hard as he could to keep it level, activating the boost mechanism again as soon as he had the chance. Barely, by less than ten feet, he cleared the fence surrounding the construction site, landing hard on the barren

road.

"Damn," he said, slowing the Chopper down as his shield-system beeped incessantly. He looked back up to the garage, but was surprised: the Brutes weren't following him. "Well, that **\*\*sucks\*\***." He said. "I just did a Hell-jump for nothing."

Suddenly, the first of the Choppers came flying out of the garage from the same spot he'd just come from. A second later, another one followed, and another, and another.

"I know! I **\*\*know\*\***!" He said bitterly, looking up at the sky, to Heaven, "be **\*\*careful\*\*** what you wish for. Freakin' hilariousâ€|**\*\*really.\*\***" he scowled, boosting again to accelerate the Chopper. He glanced back only once, just in time to watch one of the Brutes land in the construction site, face-first. There was a small rumble as the Chopper exploded.

\_Alright,\_ he thought, \_only five more.\_ Zeke pushed the Chopper to go as fast as it would go, boosting every single time he got the chance. He could feel the occasional lucky shot from an autocannon hitting the Chopper, or worse, his shields.

He turned right, down another ruined stretch of road, dodging left and right to avoid scattered debris. Up ahead, he saw something that made his blood run cold: the road was ending.

"Oh, Hell no," he growled. Up ahead was, in his opinion, one of the world's oldest wastes of time: a "drawbridge." Both sides, for **\*\*some\*\*** reason, lifted up at an angle so that, in the middle, a ship or supply boat could travel down the river. But, for this particular bridge, the river had dried up ages ago.

And, of course, the operator seemed to have dried up with it, since both halves of the bridge were pointed up at more than sixty-degree angles.

"That's great," he muttered, glancing at the sky again. "That's just **\*\*great\*\***. I'm fighting aliens of a half-dozen different species, and do any of them get me? Of course not! I get screwed by own **\*\*damned\*\*** species and our idiotic habits of leaving things **\*\*any\*\*** way but how we found them!"

The Chopper suddenly twitched to the right as several shots from the Brutes' autocannons hit the backside of it.

"This is quite a mess," a little voice echoed in the Spartan's head.

He scoffed under his breath. "Of **\*\*course\*\***," he said, "just when I thought the situation could get no better." He paused. "I don't suppose you, in all your technological **\*\*glory\*\***, have some idea to get them off my ass?"

"Not a one," Demon said nonchalantly.

"Remind me to have you scrapped when I get back to the base."

By now, the bridge was less than one-hundred yards further down the road, and Zeke's Chopper was closing the ground quickly.

"Alright," Ezekiel said, making up his mind, "I've gotten lucky once today. Time to see if I'm two-for-two!"

With that, he sped the Brute-made craft up as fast as it could go without a boost, and drove straight for the bridge. When he was less than five feet from the edge, he activated the Chopper's boost function, causing it to launch off the edge like a rocket.

"Time to see how dumb these aliens really are," the Spartan said, bracing his feet against the seat of the Chopper, but maintaining a grip on the controls as it flew through the air.

Time seemed to slow as he glanced back to watch the Brutes. Sure enough, oneâ€|twoâ€|three of them were all flying over the edge with him. They'd fallen for it. But still, that left two more. Where were they? If they were waiting, he was a dead-man.

\_It doesn't matter.\_ He thought, bracing himself. At the last second before the Chopper started to tip downward, he flexed his legs and jumped backwards with all the muscle that he could produce between himself and the MJOLNIR armor. He did a backwards summersault in the air, and then another, landing â€" **\*\*barely\*\*** â€" on the edge of the bridge, overlooking the chasm.

"Holy Hell," he said, panting. Deep down, he was dumbstruck; he'd never have imagined that that would have actually worked.

"Not bad," the voice echoed in his head again. "I couldn't have done it better myself."

"One more **\*\*word\*\***," Zeke growled, "and I'll make you into something more useful, like an iPod."

Suddenly, the sound of a Chopper's engine roared somewhere behind him. The Spartan turned around to see one of the giant, demonic, alien-made motorcycles speeding toward him from down the road.

\_Here we go,\_ he thought, taking a deep breath and charging toward the vehicle, working deliberately to get away from the edge of the bridge.

"Stupid Brutes," he said, pulling out the Sniper Rifle. "Just try this here-"

CRACK!

The shot hit the giant wheel at the front of the vehicle, bouncing off harmlessly.

"Okay," he said, taking a breath before aiming again. "Try this againâ€|"

CRACK!

Again, the shot ricocheted off the natural protection offered by the sheer size of the Brute-vehicle.

"Damn it." He cursed. This was getting old.

CLICK!

"What the-?" he checked the rifle, only to realize that the magazine was empty. As the Chopper drew closer, he reached for the extra ammo stored on his thigh and-

It was gone.

Zeke looked down, searching frantically for the ammunition, but it was gone. So were his grenades. The only thing he still had was his Energy Sword and the piece of equipment he'd taken from the base.

\_Damn it!\_ He thought. He cursed himself for being foolish, realizing what had happened. \_They're in that God-forsaken department store. Of course I woul-\_

The Chopper's roaring engine tore him from his thoughts.

"Oh no," he said without a hint of emotion, looking up to see the Chopper boosting again, now working on covering a small, sixty-meter gap between them.

"So," Demon said, "what now?"

Ezekiel ignored the AI and took a deep breath, bracing himself. He grabbed the device that was magnetically attached to his back.

"Alright," he said, inching closer to make sure that the Brute felt comfortable trying to ram him with the Chopper as opposed to shooting at him. If the creature got smart, he was dead. "Come onâ€|" he said, "closerâ€|\*\*closer\*\*â€|"

The Brute roared so loudly that it drowned out the blaring noise of the Chopper's engine, and Zeke gripped the machine on his armor with both hands and threw it out in front of him, ducking down as he did so. A second later, as the Chopper surged forward from a boost, a tower of blue and purple light shot up from the device.

The Brute howled, trying to slow the enormous vehicle down, but it was no use: the alien had just given the craft a massive rush from its propulsion system and there was no saving it. The Chopper roared forward, into the light, and then rose up, high into the air. Its momentum caused it to fly forward in the air, and it soared right over the edge of the bridge, down into the abyss below.

Ezekiel stood up and sighed. "Wow," he said, "I actually caught a break." He took a moment, looking down at his hands, absolutely astonished. "This is incredible. I shouldn't be alive."

And, as if fate had a response to fit the moment, the last of the Brute Choppers suddenly appeared from behind a ruined building on the right side of the street Zeke had just come from. The Brute roared in triumph as it drove the vehicle straight for him.

"Of course," Zeke scowled, tightening his fists, "of \*\*course\*\*." He pulled the Energy Sword from his thigh and looked up at the tower of energy that was still pulsing from the Portable Gravity Lift on the ground.

Demon started to speak in his head. "You're not really going to-"

He activated the weapon and ran into the lift, jumping when he hit it and raising the sword high above his head.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: NOW, before anyone gets torches out, I just want to tell everyone: this was basically HALF the battle with the Horde (maybe less), and everyone else's parts are coming up. They'll be posted in a day or two, as well, so if you're a Samuel or Jason or Landon or even an Elite fan, you won't wait long. I just want a few reviews from this one, and enough time to double-check the other and make sure it's worth reading for you all.<strong>

\*\*So, very soon, I'll have the last part of the battle for you. And, if you all thought "oh, well this was boring...the odds weren't even" or anything like that...next chapter, I'm turning the tables a bit, just as a heads-up. So...yeah, chew on this for a day or two, and I'll keep you posted. :)\*\*

\*\*Thanks again, and please review, if you would...just 'cause I'm getting another one up doesn't mean I don't like to hear from you all!\*\*

### 30. Chapter 29: Twisted Metal

\*\*Author's Notes: Well, here it is! I told you all I'd have it up as soon as I could! This is it: the ending to the battle with the Horde. Trust me though, it won't be letting up when this is over. I've got plans for the city of Los Angeles. ;)\*\*

\*\*Also, really quickly, I want to thank EVERYONE for the reviews I got in such record-time! In 24 hours, I had almost ten reviews. You guys (and girls) are great! Thank you very much for all the positive things you've had to say! I hope you all enjoy this chapter as much as you did the last one...\*\*

\*\*First though, Reviews!\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hola! Hey, you kinda knew the last one ahead of time, but this one should surprise you a little bit. Plus, I got your favorite character! lol.\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Wow...as we discussed...your review...you scare me sometimes. ;) Honestly though...I hope you like (a little?) the next one...\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey, thanks for the review. Sent the PM, etc. Yep. We're set.\*\*

\*\*WolfyWolf: lol, thanks for your review! If you liked that half, I think you'll love this one. It's about as much action and carnage as I can stick into 9,000 words. ;)\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: lol, like normal, huh? Tell me if this next one's "normal." :)\*\*

**\*\*Lord Of The Trees:** That was the best fight scene yet, was it? I wanna see how this one ranks...thanks for your review as well!\*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** \*\*

**\*\*\*You beauty. You absolute beauty. I mean the fighting by the way, not you. ;)"**

**\*\*Good save, lol. You kinda had me scared for a minute. ;) Thanks though. I hope you like this one!\*\***

**\*\*PandamanX:** Proper Halo action is what everyone wants...proper Halo action is what I actually find myself half-way decent at providing! lol. It's funny you mention that I used equipment as people actually do when playing...the Gravity Lift idea came STRAIGHT from a game on Tsavo Highway. lol\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Yeah...sry for the delay. I wanted it up faster, but FanFiction argued with me...and won, lol. Glad you liked Zeke's and Steph's parts...and Demon too. ;)\*\*

**\*\*By the way, the note you mentioned about the Grunt...well, I got the quote from a friend of mine who had played on Legendary and had a Grunt shout those words at him. Originally, I spelled out "A-hole" in my story. He read through it before I posted it and told me, point blank, that it was a direct quote from the Grunt, including the "A." Since then, I've played through and grabbed a hammer myself, trying to mimic what he did...scariest part is that he was right! It was on Sierra 117, right at the very end. Try it for yourself...it's about hilarious! Hope that clears it up...\*\***

**\*\*Lord of Purple:** If that was "more than enough" action, you may wanna strap in for this one. ;) Also, Magnus will be back, but not for a while. When I say "segment" for this story, it's a set of chapters. For instance, the entire Attack On Zulu Company was one segment. Either way, hope that clears it up.\*\*

**\*\*Also, I've got U'svere in here for you. I hope you get a kick out of his fight-scenes. Finally, in regards to Demon...maybe. I haven't decided yet. ;)\*\***

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian:** lol! I'm glad you liked Stephanie's little burst of rage. I wanted to give her some real attitude, and I think everyone enjoyed it. Also...Zeke has his moments, but he'll have several moments of bad luck before it's over too.\*\*

**\*\*And, also, your note about the Brutes...there'll be some rockets this time around...and some grenades...not exactly how you worded it though (although, that did absolutely make my day! I was laughing so hard I nearly fell out of my chair!).\*\***

**\*\*NOW, without further wait...Chapter 29, which sounds a LOT like 28 in the title, but don't be fooled! lol\*\***

**\*\*\***

**\* \* \***

**><p><strong>Chapter 29:<strong>**



â€" \*\*Twisted Metal â€" \*\*

\*\*1900 Hours - January 1, 2553\*\*

\*\*Streets of Los Angeles, California\*\*

Things had started out great for Zulu Company, the Sangheili and the Marines that were stationed inside the school. When they first started to execute the plan that Samuel had so quickly put together, they took the Brutes by storm, crushing them at every turn with only minimal casualties. Both of the two Mortar Wraiths had been completely destroyed. Over a dozen Choppers and Ghosts had been turned into nothing but scrap. The various foot-soldiers the Brutes had employed to come into the school after them had been sliced to ribbons and blown straight to Hell.

And then, the tables started to turn. With Samuel, Jason, Stephanie, and the Marines all on the first floor of the school, trying to fend off Brutes coming in from all sides, Victoria was on the top floor with the Elite, U'svere, and another, red-armored Sangheili warrior, working to stop the Brutes that had started piling in a few minutes before. Zeke was nowhere to be found and wasn't answering to anyone's calls.

And finally, on the worst front of all, were the last of the soldiers: Landon, Blaine, Ahrmonro and two of his last three Elites. Outside, the Brute Choppers seemed to just keep coming. For every one Landon or Blaine destroyed, another one took its place.

Landon had gone outside with every intention of helping Blaine in a one-sided fight against a Banshee and a pair of Prowlers. He'd grabbed a Rocket Launcher, a Battle Rifle, two Plasma Grenades, two Spike Grenades, and a Bubble Shield before running out like a madman. Unfortunately, by the time he was able to \*\*get\*\* outside, past the dozens of Brutes all trying to get into the school, Blaine had hijacked a Chopper and raced off down the street with his three pursuers all close behind.

Now Landon found himself in the middle of the street with the three Elites, trying to fight off dozens of Brutes who were charging them with everything from a pair of Brute Spikers to a Prowler. The Banshee above them was still giving air-support, and on more than one occasion, they'd been forced to dive for cover from its mounted Fuel Rod Cannon.

The only blessing, it seemed, was that the Anti-Air Wraith was busy aiming at the top half of the school, pounding the area near Victoria with relentless shots from its own six cannons. Landon knew that, if that tank decided to aim for them, they were as good as dead.

"We can't keep doing this." He said at last as he picked off a half-dozen Grunts with his Battle Rifle that were coming from one end of the street. He reloaded the gun, slamming a new magazine in before taking sight again.

The gold-armored Field Master took two steps backwards, stopping beside him and deactivating the Energy Sword in his hand. "The Brutes are everywhere." He said bitterly. "No single horde is this large. The cowards have called for backup!"

Landon nodded, firing another three-round-burst from the rifle while moving the scope over two of the Grunts. Both of them hit the ground with a 'thud.' He looked at the Elite and motioned to his rifle. "I'm almost spent." He said.

The Field Master nodded. "The sword's battery is nearly empty as well. And my Plasma Rifles are completely drained." He looked around at his three fellow warriors, both of which were laying into the Brute foot-soldiers that seemed to be crawling out of every nook and cranny in the street with their rifles and Carbines.

"Landon!" Samuel's voice suddenly echoed in his head.

"Yeah," he said, "what is it, boss-man?" Landon could barely hear himself talking over the sounds of gunfire and screaming in the background.

"The Marines haâ€"â€" The screams, combined with static, drowned out the brown-clad Spartan's voice.

"Say again," Landon said, yelling to get his voice through. "Say that again, Samuel! You're cutting out." He glanced back and forth to make sure that no Brutes got the jump on him during his chat.

"The Mariâ€"â€"a Wartâ€"â€" Static took over for a few seconds. "â€"â€"ey've got a GaÂ-Â-Â-â€"â€"

"\*\*Damn it Sam\*\*!" He yelled, annoyed. "What the \*\*Hell\*\* are you saying? The freakin' COMM's not working!"

"A Gauss!" the voice yelled in his head. "They've gâ€"â€"\*\*Gauss\*\*!"

Landon almost dropped his rifle. They had a Gauss, as in a 'Gauss Warthog,' as in a Warthog with an M68 Gauss Cannon mounted to the back of it. The M68 was a miniature Magnetic Accelerator Cannon, capable of firing an unbelievable amount of ammunition at velocities that made impact near instantaneous.

"Where is it?" He asked, almost hyperventilating with excitement. "Where's the Gauss?"

"Behind theâ€"â€"ool. It'sâ€"â€"school."

"Behind the school?"

"â€"â€"eah."

"On my way!" Landon said, terminating the link. He turned to Ahrmonro. "Any way you can spare me a soldier?" He paused. "I'll bring you back something to shoot with."

The Elite made the same movement with his mandibles he'd made on the ship, and Landon, like the others, still believed it was his attempt at a smile. "Take who you need." He said.

Landon nodded and ran up to one of the Elites, clad in blue armor. He was picking off Brutes with a Covenant Carbine.

"Hey," he said, "I've got permission from your boss. Can you come with me?" He paused, then added, "I need someone who can aim."

The Elite stopped and glanced past Landon, who knew he was looking at the Field Master for confirmation. A second later, the Sangheili soldier let out a low growl and nodded.

"Great," Landon said, "follow me." He took off for the school, pacing himself until he heard the Elite behind him. When he got to one of the two entrances, he started running alongside the wall of the building, all the way around until he found a huge hole in one of the brick segments.

He scrunched a bit and ran inside, running down the hall straight ahead of him until he hit an intersection. Landon could hear gunfire to his left, so that was the way he went, running down the hallway and feeling his biomechanical legs stomp a few inches into the ground at every step.

Finally, he reached two titanium doors that led to the cafeteria.

"Sam," he said, "I'm here. I'm outside the southeast entrance."

"Coming," Samuel answered. A second later, the two doors were pulled open and the giant Spartan was standing between them. "It's out back." He said, motioning to a set of doors that led, presumably, to yet another hallway.

Landon nodded quickly, and then took off on a dead sprint for the doors. He hit them and plowed through, running at full speed down another hallway filled to the brim with classrooms on either side. Finally, at the end of the hall, were a set of double-doors.

"Here we go," he said to himself, running through the doors and coming out into a huge, garage-type room. There were two large doors at the back side, and the bodies of a dozen small cars littered the area.

And, in the middle of the room, stood a lone vehicle: undamaged and ready for action. It was a single Warthog with an attached M68. The Marines, no doubt, had brought it with them when they made the school their own little home-away-from-home.

"Yes," he said, practically drooling. "Yes-yes-**\*\*yes\*\***!" he ran for the driver's seat, but then realized he'd have to open the door that led outside first. He looked around, but found that, for some stupid reason, the controls to the doors were not in the garage. He saw a window on one wall overlooking the area as well, but it was too high for him to actually see into.

There was, however, a door on the wall adjacent to the way he'd come in. He walked up and twisted the handle. It was locked, but the door itself was nothing but wood. The Spartan pulled the metal handle right out of the door itself, and then kicked it wide open.

"Who's there?" a deep, alien voice howled. Landon took a few steps forward and glanced around the corner to see a Brute at the end of the very short, 'L' shaped hall he'd just entered. There was a glass

door behind the alien and beyond that, Landon could see the room that he'd seen from the inside of the garage.

"Uh-oh," he said with a smile, "you should've been warned: neverâ€|\*\*ever\*\* come between me and a Gauss." With that, he angled his shoulder and ran straight at the Brute as fast as he could. At the last second, he activated his arm-shield and rammed the alien straight into the glass. It shattered, and he kept going until he pinned the creature to the far wall.

Without giving the Brute a chance to recover, he promptly stomped one of its feet with his own, crushing the bones like twigs. As it roared in rage, he put his foot up and thrust it into its stomach, pushing forward until he met resistance in the form of the wall behind the alien.

He pulled his foot out of the gushing pit of alien parts and fluids that he'd created, letting the Brute fall to the floor in a heap.

Landon glanced around the small room and almost immediately found what he was looking for: two identical controls with only two buttons on each: "OPEN" and "CLOSE." He pressed "OPEN" on both and watched as the doors in the garage lifted, revealing the street outside.

\* \* \*

>"Go ahead," Samuel said. Jason nodded. The giant Spartan had just approved his going out into the street to help the Elitesâ€|<strong>alone</strong>. "But watch your back. None of the rest of us are going to be able to get out there yet."

"Don't worry about me." Jason said, bringing a Brute Shot to bear. "Just keep the Brutes out of here for when I get back."

With that, he turned and ran to the front of the cafeteria, where two of the halls both led out into the street. One of the Marines standing guard took a peak outside and then opened the door wide for the Spartan. Jason nodded and walked out, being careful not to be spotted as he took in the situation.

The entire street had gone to Hell. There were eight Choppers zipping back and forth, taking potshots at the Elites but not stopping for fear of being stuck with a pair of Plasma Grenades. Five Ghosts sped up and down the street as well, waiting for a chance to run the Sangheili over from behind. A single Prowler was coming from around the corner of the department store across the street and a Banshee loomed overhead.

The AA Wraith was no longer hammering the building. Instead, it had its back to the school and appeared to be watching the two Phantoms that were hovering ominously over the battlefield, casting huge shadows on the whole area.

In addition to that, Jason knew there were \*\*dozens\*\* of Brutes he couldn't see, all of them either trying to find a way into the cafeteria he'd just come from or perhaps even watching him at that very moment. The mere thought caused him to glance around nervously.

"What does it look like out there?" Samuel's voice echoed in his head suddenly, snapping him back from his nervous glances.

"Bad," he said plainly. "It's bad." He paused, looking at the Wraith. "I might be able to turn the tables a bit though."

"Go for it. Just be careful."

Jason nodded even though Samuel couldn't see him. "Sure." He said.

\_I wonder,\_ he thought. He was looking â€" almost staring â€" at the Wraith, contemplating whether or not he'd be able to board it when it was at the other side of the street and there were a dozen Covenant-controlled vehicles zooming around.

"Demon, watch out!" The Field Master roared, his voice loud enough to raise the dead. Jason turned to see him pointing at him. Instinctively, he turned around and saw what he was pointing at.

A Chopper, not ten feet away, was coming right at him.

Jason yelled, putting up both his arm-shields and bracing himself. Even with the increased shielding, the Covenant craft hit him with all the force of a **\*\*train\*\***, lifting him up off the ground and sending him careening into one of the titanium braces on the outside of the school. He heard his own bones cracking as he hit the brace and tumbled to the ground.

Jason moaned as he tried to stand. "Woah," he mumbled, "that really hurts." He glanced up in time to watch the Chopper turn around in the street, facing him again. "Oh shit," he groaned.

The Brute piloting the craft howled and charged forward, the engine of the Chopper boosting for all it was worth. Jason glanced down at himself. Both arm-shields were completely drained and needed to recharge. His actual shields were nil. And, to make matters worse, while he could move and he knew that his spinal cord wasn't damaged badly, he was having a real tough time moving around.

Before Jason could even worry about a way to help himself, however, he heard something coming from his right, and glanced over to see Landon driving a Warthog right toward him. At the last second, however, Landon switched directions, instead heading straight for the Brute Chopper's exposed left side.

Jason watched as the 'Hog power-slid into the side of the Brute-driven vehicle, rolling the craft several times before it stopped. But, even as the Brute started to flip the craft over, the Elite on the gun started laying into it, firing what Jason realized was a Gauss Cannon. The alien shot it multiple times until the Chopper behind the Brute detonated.

"Sorry I'm late." Landon's voice echoed inside his head. "But I brought bigger toys! You just relax for a minute and let me handle the Choppers!"

Jason scowled. For someone who knew so much about vehicles, he knew very little about what he was up against. There were seven Choppers still zipping every which way around the street. As if that weren't

enough, the Anti-Air Wraith was now watching them and-

"Damn it!" Jason yelled, seeing the Wraith for the first time in several minutes. It wasn't facing the Phantoms anymore. As if that weren't enough, the Phantoms weren't over the department store anymore. They were directly above the street, shooting straight down with their mounted Plasma Cannons.

And the Gauss Cannon couldn't aim straight up.

In a second, Jason made his decision and forced himself to stand despite the pain that was now radiating from his back into his legs and arms and head. He felt a tingling sensation as the AI in his MJOLNIR armor administered biofoam to any cuts and bruises he'd sustained. It wouldn't "heal" them, per se, but it would keep them from getting infected or otherwise grow any worse.

"Take that, you miserable sons of-" a voice echoed in his ears.

\_That's Landon,\_ he thought as he watched another Chopper detonate. Suddenly, he saw one of the Phantoms lower slightly, dropping almost two-dozen Brutes out from its sides. He had to go, **\*\*now\*\***.

With all the resolve he could gather, he took off, across the street, straight for the Wraith. He ran hard, through the now-**\*\*blinding\*\*** pain, dodging left and right to avoid stray Choppers and Ghosts and plasma-bolts from above.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, he reached the other side of the street and the Anti-Air tank with its back to him. He limped around to the front as quietly as possible, even though, he thought, there was no way anyone was going to hear him with Landon driving around the street yelling and the Elite shooting the Gauss Cannon every two seconds.

Jason went around to the front of the craft and leapt onto the top, where the entrance to the driver's control-panel was. He gripped the sides of the hatch that shielded the driver from the outside world and pulled, finally gathering enough muscle to pull it all the way open, exposing the Brute Major inside.

"Demon!" it growled.

"Freak!" Jason responded, priming a Spike Grenade and impaling the Brute's skull with it. He drew back, away from the hole and watched as a conical tower of spikes erupted from within. A second later, he pulled the Brute's corpse from the driver's panel and threw it to the side. With that done, he hopped in himself and the hatch closed above him.

\_Alright,\_ he thought, looking at the complicated control panel in front of him. There were all kinds of switches and buttons, but a few of them, the few he needed to use, were fairly straightforward. Even better, one of the panels connected directly with his HUD, allowing him to see targets outside perfectly.

"Time to kick some ass!" he said, using the Wraith's targeting system to look straight up at the Phantoms above. Without a moment's pause, he let loose all six of the giant plasma-cannons and a half-dozen

streams of green energy erupted from the tank. They flew straight for the Phantom, hitting its underbelly and detonating in a haze of green smoke.

When that didn't do it, Jason fired again—and again. Less than fifteen seconds later, the Phantom above exploded, a massive blue cloud shrouding the inside as huge pieces of its frame fell to the ground below.

Jason didn't stop, though. He turned to the other Phantom, which was now trying to flee the scene after watching what had happened to the other. Even as it tried to escape, Jason fired literally **\*\*dozens\*\*** of green beams until it too erupted and detonated a couple of blocks away, like one of the world's largest fireworks.

"Not bad, Jason!" Landon said into the COMM. "I've taken out four Choppers and three Ghosts though. I'd say I gotcha beat!"

Jason scowled. "Yeah well—" He stopped, seeing something huge and blue enter the street from the next block, right behind Landon's 'Hog. The Spartan did a double-take and realized that he was right. His eyes **\*\*weren't\*\*** playing tricks on him. "Landon, **\*\*move\*\***!"

Landon couldn't move in time, however, and a huge plasma-mortar hit the ground beside the Warthog, sending it rolling and flying through the air. The vehicle crashed into the side of the department store as the Covenant-controlled Wraith fired another mortar. This one was high, though, and hit the wall above where the Warthog had hit the store. Jason watched as Landon, the Elite, and the burning 'Hog were covered in falling rubble.

"Shit!" He yelled. "Landon! Can you hear me? **\*\*Landon\*\***!"

He got no answer.

He turned to shoot at the Wraith, but his eyes were met with an incoming mortar that slammed into his own vehicle with force enough to rival an earthquake. Jason was about to shoot when he realized that another mortar was on its way. His shields at nothing and the Wraith falling apart around him, he made the snap decision to abandon it, jumping out and rolling away just as the second shot hit it and it detonated, sending jagged pieces of metal in all directions.

And then, the new Wraith turned its sights back to Landon, whose arm was sticking up from the rubble. The Spartan was trying to get out.

Jason couldn't think of anything to do. He couldn't move and felt like he was about to black out. He couldn't get there fast enough even if he **\*\*could\*\*** move. With no other options, he did the only thing he could think of.

"Samuel! **\*\*Samuel\*\***! We need help out here! Hurry, Landon's about to be cremated alive!"

\* \* \*

>"Hurry, Landon's about to be cremated alive!" <p>The words echoed in Samuel's helmet, <strong>shattering</strong> his calm attitude as he

was talking to Sergeant Byers and the Captain, Malcolm Burns. He turned instinctively to the door leading to the street.

"Where you going?" the Sergeant asked.

"I'll be back!" Samuel yelled, taking off. "Hold the Brutes out at any cost until I get back! Victoria's upstairs if you need help!"

Even with the two higher-ups yelling behind him, Samuel kept going. He didn't care what they had to say. Not right now. They didn't know what was happening. The team â€" **his team** â€" was in jeopardy. Landon, from the sound of it, was in jeopardy.

He ran up to one set of titanium doors, throwing them open and storming through the hall. There was a single Brute Major there, trying to square off with him. Samuel didn't have time for it. Not now. He ran right up the Brute, grabbed its shoulders and threw it off to the side, into the wall, never even slowing down.

Finally, he hit the glass doors that led out into the street. He didn't stop to open them, instead simply crashing through their weakened frames out into the evening light.

And then he saw it.

The plan was no longer working. Landon and one of the Sangheili were crawling out from a pile of rubble next to a burning Warthog. Jason was off to one side, face-down on the ground beside the destroyed Anti-Air Wraith.

And then, off to the right, was the new Wraith, big and blue and looking right at Landon and the Elite.

Before Samuel could even consider moving, the Wraith fired. The mortar started high, arcing slowing downward, toward the fallen soldiers.

Suddenly, the world was moving in slow-motion. Samuel, for the first time, was stunned. He had no idea what to do. He wasn't Victoria: he couldn't run up to Landon and the Elite, grab them, and take off before the mortar hit them. He wasn't Jason: he couldn't just stand there and put his shields up. Hell, he couldn't even **get** there fast enough. The shot would've already hit. The damage would be done.

He had the Spartan Laser with him that he could use to take out the Wraith, but it wouldn't be enough to save Landon. The shot was already on its way.

The giant Spartan glanced back and forth, looking for anything â€" anything at all â€" to save his teammate from imminent death.

There was nothing.

"No," he said, refusing to accept it. There had to be **something**.

The shot hit its peak and began to arc slowly downward.



"No!" He looked around again. This time, he saw something. It was a long-shot. It was unorthodox. It was just plain desperate.

But Samuel didn't care.

There was a group of four Brute Majors in the street twenty feet from him, and he sped toward them as fast as he could, taking six-foot strides the whole way. Seconds later, with the mortar still in the air, he gripped one of the Brutes around the neck, pulled it down and grabbed its legs in his other hand, which, to him and his enormous bulk, felt small and frail.

Samuel lifted the howling alien above his head and reared back before throwing the beast as one might make a throw-in during a soccer game. He led the mortar a bit and watched, praying hard and fast that the throw was good enough. The Brute soared through the air, bellowing the whole way as it crossed the mortar's path

And hit it.

The Wraith's shot detonated in the air, causing the alien entrails and blue plasma to spread across the street like a hideous show of power. Samuel immediately leveled the Spartan Laser and held the trigger down.

\_Threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|\_

BOOM!

The red beam of energy engulfed the side of the Wraith as the craft turned to face its new threat. Unfortunately, the laser's battery was now at forty-percent, and the Wraith was still moving around.

Samuel ran toward the Wraith and away from the other Brute Majors as the gun overheated and subsequently cooled. The Wraith fired at him, but he didn't care. He ran faster, charging the gun again as the mortar hit the ground some several-dozen feet behind him.

He counted out loud, praying that this shot would do it.

"Threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|"

BOOM!

This time the laser absolutely **\*\*devoured\*\*** the cockpit, totaling the Wraith and causing it to go up in smoke. Samuel stopped, catching his breath.

Before he could even get a break, however, he heard the sound of Chopper and did a 180-degree turn to see Blaine come blasting into the street from around the corner of the department storeâ€|with two Prowlers right behind him.

Blaine drove so close to the store that the edges of the front wheel actually scraped against the wall as he tried to outrun his pursuers. Samuel thought that he might have a chanceâ€|until the shadow of a Banshee appeared overhead. Before Blaine knew what hit him, the aerial vehicle's Fuel Rod Cannon hit the ground behind him, and the combined power of the two Plasma Turrets on the Prowlers pushed his vehicle over, rolling it again and again until it came to rest against the burning shells of one of the first two Wraiths. Blaine

came crawling out from under the wreckage, bruised and with sparks flying from his armor.

Samuel yelled "Blaine!" in an effort to let the other Spartan know that he was there and instantly raised the Spartan Laser. Suddenly, he realized that the gun had only one more shot in it. Samuel looked at the battery indicator disbelievingly. It just couldn't be. He couldn't take out a Banshee and two Prowlers with one shot. It couldn't be done.

"Samuel!" Blaine's voice echoed in his helmet. "Get off the street! Get back inside! There're too many!" All of a sudden, his voice was drowned out by the firing of several Plasma Turrets.

"Blaine!" Samuel yelled again, holding the trigger down on the Spartan Laser. As the seconds counted down, he prayed silently that someday, **somehow**, this could work. And, as the Prowlers circled his fallen ally, he ran straight to his left, keeping them both in his sight.

\_Threeâ€¦|\_

One Prowler blocked Blaine from his view entirely, then kept circling as the other took its place.

\_Twoâ€¦|\_

Again, they circled, and Samuel watched Blaine take cover beside the broken Chopper in a desperate attempt to stay alive.

\_Oneâ€¦|\_

The weapon fired, sending a blazing red beam of energy through the first Prowler. The laser didn't stop, however. It kept going, passing less than a **foot** over Blaine's head before cutting into and instantly detonating the other Prowler as it came around behind him.

Without a wasted second, Samuel dropped the depleted laser and ran toward his comrade. Before he could take three steps, however, he watched as a green ball of energy fell from the sky and impacted with Blaine's Chopper, causing it to explode in a fury of red flame and flying spikes.

Samuel stopped, stunned. The Banshee was still there. Worse, it was now circling around for another strike, and Blaine wasn't moving already.

This time, however, the brown-clad Spartan didn't have a clue what to do. The laser was empty. He had a Battle Rifle that he could use, but it wouldn't so much as **faze** the flying Covenant craft. He'd used all the grenades he had back inside the school.

"No," he whispered, not believing that there was nothing he could do. Life always provided something. He needed that now. Somethingâ€¦**anything**â€¦|

"Die Demon!" a small, shrill voice cried out behind him. He turned to see a Grunt piloting a Ghost and boosting right for him.

Samuel looked up at the sky, smiling beneath his helmet. He mouthed "thank you" and turned to face the Ghost. At the last second before it would've hit him, he raised his right leg and brought it down hard on the craft's front end, stopping it dead and flipping the Grunt out onto the ground.

"Ah!" the Grunt screamed and took off toward the school in a zigzagging run as Samuel grabbed the back end of the Ghost. He got as good a grip as he could with both hands and looked behind him, finding the Banshee in the sky.

"\*\*Please\*\* let this work," he said, looking toward the Ghost before turning around hard and winging it into the sky with all the strength he had.

For the second time, the world seemed to slow. The Ghost flew through the air, spinning countless times as it covered the distance between itself and the Banshee, which still had its back to the incoming vehicle. A second later, the distance between them disappeared and two Covenant crafts simultaneously **\*\*detonated\*\*** in the sky, spilling twisted metal and alien organs out into the air like a hellish fireworks display.

Samuel sighed, staring at the spot where the vehicles had connected. It worked. Somehow, he'd done it.

"Not bad, Demon." The Field Master said, walking up beside him. There was crimson blood on his armor and the Energy Sword appeared to be down to its very last spark in battery-power.

Samuel nodded, turning around to look at Jason, who was still face-down on the ground next to the AA Wraith. He had to be taken inside. He had to be-

Something white shot through the air and Samuel heard a roar from the other Elite still outside with them, a silver-armored Special Operations soldier named Reka Boram. He turned in time to watch the Elite stagger backwards as a small, white beam hit his head. A second later, another beam, from a different spot, hit the side of the Sangheili's helm.

And then, out of nowhere, a third came from somewhere in the department store, penetrating whatever was left of the Elite's shields before blazing a hole right through the alien's head. Reka fell to the ground, dead.

Samuel found he couldn't yell out the word fast enough. He practically screamed "snipers!" and ran with the Field Master behind a pair of destroyed Choppers. The giant Spartan brought his Battle Rifle to bear and started shooting everything he could find. In a matter of ten seconds, he'd taken the lives of four Jackal Snipers, one right after another.

"Samuel!" a human's voice called out to him from the school. Samuel turned to see the Sergeant standing in one of the doorways. The super-soldier tried to wave him back in, but he was either ignoring him or simply didn't understand. "We got 'em! The Brutes are-"

Another Beam Rifle sounded in the streets, and Samuel watched the

small white beam of energy punch a hole in the Sergeant's skull. The man fell forward without a single sound except for a dull thud when he hit the ground.

Samuel was so angry he was shaking. The snipers were going to keep picking them off and his only presently available sniper was face down beside an Anti-Air Wraith. The other one hadn't answered a single transmission and was nowhere to be found.

\_Zeke,\_ he thought, \_where \_\_\*\*are\*\*\_\_ you when we-\_

"Look out, Spartan!" The Field Master's voice tore him from his thoughts in a second. Samuel turned around quickly and saw nothing but a blue sphere in the air less than four feet way from him. Somewhere beyond it, a Grunt was cheering.

Suddenly, there was a CRACK! and the Plasma Grenade exploded in the air, sending blue energy washing over his shields and across his visor. His suit beeped annoyingly as his shields failed in the superheated explosion.

Samuel saw the Grunt looking up, toward the department store. He turned as well in time to see a black-armored soldier take aim and peg the Grunt once, right in the face.

"Good save," Samuel managed through gasping breaths. "Thanks." He was still feeling the effects of his near-death experience.

Ezekiel nodded and jumped down from the window of the store, running in Samuel and the Field Master's direction.

"You don't happen to have Active Camouflage, do you?" Samuel heard his voice inside his helmet, even though he was obviously talking to the gold-armored Elite.

"Reka did." The Field Master said, glancing toward the Elite's body. "I do not."

Samuel heard him say "okay" and look right at him as he was about to pass by. "Here Goliath," he said, "I lifted this from one of the Hammer Bros." He grabbed something from the back of his armor. "Catch!" As he ran by, he threw a small device that resembled the Elites' Active Camouflage, but glowed with a golden hue rather than a blue one.

\* \* \*

>"I think that is all of them." U'svere said, looking first to Vano Nesavai and the Spartan, Victoria. A dozen more Brutes had just come in from the door that led out onto the roof and had been dispatched without much difficulty. <p>"I think so too," the Spartan said. "We can't leave until we're sure, though."<p>

"Agreed," U'svere said.

"Commander," Vano said, stepping forward, "I volunteer to go and search for any more of the beasts."

U'svere nodded approvingly. "Go."

Vano nodded, raising his Plasma Rifles and walking toward the door.

"If you see anything," the female Spartan called behind him, "let us know immediately. Don't try to fight them on your own."

The red-armored Elite nodded before opening the door. There were a set of about a dozen steps that led up to another door. He walked cautiously up to it and opened it in complete silence.

\_Time for battle,\_ he thought anxiously as he stepped outside. However, he was disappointed. He had a clear view of the entire area, and all the fighting was going on in the street. There wasn't a single Brute on the roof.

"Commander," he said in an almost-depressed tone. "The Brutes up here have been finished. We have killed them all."

"Excellent," U'svere's voice echoed in his head. "The Spartan and I will go downstairs to alert the others. Meet us there."

"Yes, Commander," he said, terminating the link. Vano turned back toward the door, but stopped suddenly when something caught his eye. Something had glimmered in the evening sun.

The Elite drew his Plasma Rifles, unable to justify calling the Commander again over something so foolish. He spun a full circle and saw nothing, so he lowered his weapons.

"Elite \*\*scum\*\*," a deep, low voice echoed to his right. He brought the rifles to bear once more but saw nothing.

"What was-" He paused. Vano was weighing the idea of telling the Commander when something struck him hard in the back. He fell to the floor and turned around in time to feel the enormous blade of a Brute Shot be lodged into his chest.

And then, out of nowhere, over a dozen Brutes simply appeared.

"No," he groaned, realizing his mistake. The Brutes were using the same Active Camouflage the Elites had always employed. He started to speak, but found that he couldn't, as something was pressing down hard on his neck. Vano looked to see that one of the Brutes, a Captain, had its foot on him.

Seconds later, unable to draw breath, he watched the world grow darker and darkerâ€¦until it was completely black.

\* \* \*

>Blaine sat up beside his destroyed Chopper. He glanced around for only a second before finding his Rocket Launcher on the ground a few feet away. Ironically, it was lying next to a fully-functional Chopper that had somehow escaped detonation.

<p><strong>Damn<strong>," he moaned, "my \*\*head\*\*." He blinked a few times in an effort to get his vision back up to par. In those few blinks, he immediately saw Ezekiel running flat-out across the street.

Beams of white light flew behind him from five different angles, all

of them unable to hit him. He passed over the body of a fallen Elite-

And he vanished.

Actually, 'vanish' isn't quite the right word. The light surrounding his body bent and reflected sufficiently to make him almost completely invisible, although Blaine could still locate him due to a tracking system on his HUD.

The genetically-altered Spartan stopped in the middle of the street, completely invisible to all but his allies. Blaine waited for a minute before hearing him fire.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

As he spun in a circle, shooting, his camouflage dissipated and four Jackals fell from two- and three-story windows all around the street. There was a clicking noise as the rifle reloaded and a final CRACK! as another Jackal fell.

"That's the last of them." Zeke's voice rang out. "All snipers are officially KIA." He paused. "Except **\*\*me\*\***, of course."

Blaine rolled his eyes. He was about to make a retort when he heard an engine near him rev up. He turned to see a Brute Chieftain in red and black armor sitting in the driver's seat of the Chopper his rockets had been sitting next to.

"Wretched Demons!" the Brute growled, apparently **\*\*completely\*\*** oblivious to Blaine's presence. Before the alien could take off, Blaine forced himself to stand and stepped behind the Chopper, grabbing the seat by its bottom.

Blaine didn't know if he had the strength to stop the Chopper if the Brute elected to take off in it, so he did the first thing that came to his mind: he used both hands to grip the seat and pushed his arms straight up in the air, effectively flipping the giant motorcycle over on its front wheel. The back side landed face down with the Chieftain underneath it, damaging the alien's shields. The Brute pushed the Chopper over and freed itself, roaring in rage.

"Jeez," Blaine muttered irritably. "Someone's got a temper."

The Brute roared threateningly and grabbed the handle of the Gravity Hammer it had on its back. It brought the hammer up in front of its chest, waving it around menacingly and growled, "Demon."

Blaine scowled. "Cute," he said, and grabbed the Rocket Launcher, putting it on his shoulder. He fired once and the rocket hit the Brute in the chest, knocking it back several feet and causing it bellow in pain. A second rocket left the launcher and silenced the alien for good.

"Well," Blaine said, smiling, "that wasn't-"

BOOM!

Something hit him hard in the back and he saw green energy wash over his armor and in front of his face. With his shields failing, he

turned around right as another blast connected with his chest, knocking him over. He blacked out almost instantly.

\* \* \*

>"Blaine!" Zeke heard Samuel yell over the communications-system. He turned in time to watch a green ball of energy connect with the white-armored Spartan's chest. Blaine fell over and stopped moving. Ezekiel glanced to the left to see the attacker: a Brute Chieftain, clad in gold armor and wielding a Fuel Rod Cannon. The alien was standing at one end of the department store, where it had a clear view of the whole street. <p>"Coward!" Zeke yelled from the middle of the road. He pulled the Energy Sword from his thigh and activated it as he took off running, suddenly feeling the heat radiating from it on his right side.<p>

He could hear Samuel's voice in his ears, but he didn't stop. His yelling had only just barely been enough to get the Brute to turn its attention away from Blaine, who was unconscious on the ground. If he stopped, the Chieftain could very easily finish him.

The Chieftain made a motion with its hand that, on Earth, would mean "come on," and Zeke cursed under his breath. The alien was playing with him.

"I'll teach him to toy with **\*\*me\*\***," he growled, running faster and closing ground. He was thirty yards from the Brute when it did something he'd have never expected: it grabbed a small, spherical device from its armor that resembled a Power Drain, except it had a yellow hue to it. The Brute howled and threw the device onto the road, and suddenly, Zeke was **\*\*blind\*\***.

He knew immediately what it was: a Flare. Zulu Company had been alerted to their existence, but were never shown a picture or given any real description of it. Now, Ezekiel was wishing they had been.

The little ball shot a blinding light in all directions, getting so bright that Zeke had to close his eyes altogether it hurt so badly. Acting on instinct, he leapt into the air, knowing that he'd come down very close to the Brute when he hit the ground.

Before he came down, however, he opened his eyes and saw something else he hadn't anticipated: a green stream of energy right in front of his eyes. The Fuel Rod connected and detonated, sending Ezekiel flying at an odd angle into the first-floor wall of the department store. Zeke slid down, landing on his back with his shields blaring.

"Bastard," he growled, pulling his legs up and flexing his stomach before jumping straight up onto his feet. Again, however, he was met with a glowing green ball of energy.

And once again, he was flung mercilessly into the wall, this time falling down to his knees before forcing himself to stand. He reached for the Deployable Cover he'd taken from one of the Brutes after using his Active Camouflage and dropped it in front of him. A half-second later, the device created a small, half-dome energy shield between him and the Brute.

Ezekiel cursed himself for letting a Brute trick him and worked to stand on shaky legs. Before he could even get the hang of them, however, another blast hit the shield, causing it to weaken and begin glowing red.

When the haze had cleared, Zeke could see two more blasts coming toward him: the last two of the Fuel Rod Cannon's five-round-magazine. The first shot hit the shield and Zeke felt the superheated plasma wash around it, barely missing him as the shield failed on impact. He braced himself as the last shot homed in on him.

\* \* \*

>BOOM! <p>The fifth shot from the Fuel Rod Cannon hit Zeke in the chest, sending the black-armored Spartan into the wall of the store once again. He hit at ground level and was still standing for a moment. And then, with his strength finally gone, Ezekiel fell first to his knees, and then face-down onto the ground, where he stayed, unmoving.<p>

Samuel yelled for him over the link, but Zeke didn't answer. He now joined the ranks of three other Spartans, Blaine, Landon and Jason: either unconscious orâ€|dead. Samuel had yelled for them tooâ€|but none of them had given a response.

"Watch them for me." Samuel said to Ahrmonro. Before the Elite could even respond, he jumped over the two Choppers they were behind and ran straight for the Brute Chieftain, who was more than eighty yards away, at the end of the street, in front of an old office-building.

Samuel brought his Battle Rifle up in his right hand and fired off to his sides, killing Grunts and unarmored Brutes that came near his fallen allies. No more was he calm, cool, or collected. Up to four of his fellow Spartans â€" of his **\*\*friends\*\*** â€" could be dead, two of which could be attributed to the Brute Chieftain in front of him.

And now, **\*\*that\*\*** Chieftain was going to die.

\* \* \*

>Gortalus watched with furious, yet amused eyes as the enormous brown-armored Demon charged him from the other end of the battlefield. When he was forty-feet away, the human threw the weapon it was holding to the ground so hard that it shattered. Even without it, the Demon did not slow down. <p>The Brute Chieftain growled lowly, raising the Fuel Rod Cannon. Even after the casualties, this was going to be a great victory: at least five of the Demons were going to be dead at the end of the day.<p>

"Time to **\*\*die\*\***, human scum!" the Brute said. He fired the Fuel Rod Cannon three times in rapid succession. The streaming green blasts flew through the air, toward the Demon. Two seconds later, the first one hit the brown-clad soldier head-on and exploded, shrouding him in a green mist.

Before the smoke had even cleared, the second shot hitâ€|then the **\*\*third\*\***. The explosions rang out across the street and Gortalus



laughed coldly as he looked into the green haze that was spreading out in a large cloud.

"The Prophet will reward me greatly for-" He stopped. It **\*\*couldn't\*\*** be. It wasn't **\*\*possible\*\***. Something was moving in the smoke.

And then, like some twisted nightmare, the Demon came charging from the haze, covered in glowing silver bands. He hadn't even slowed down, and now he was less than twenty feet from Gortalus.

"No!" The Brute yelled, firing the last two rounds from the magazine. The shots hit the Demon and detonated, but they did nothing. Somehow, it had gotten its hands on one of the Brutes' pieces of equipmentâ€¦a piece of equipment that gave the user shielding like nothing elseâ€¦a piece of equipment capable of granting invincibility. And now, the tables had turned.

\* \* \*

>Still protected by his temporary invulnerability, Samuel reached the Brute Chieftain. The alien took the Fuel Rod Cannon from its shoulder and tried to bludgeon him with it, but Samuel simply smacked it from the creature's hands before hitting the Brute in the stomach with both fists. The Chieftain recoiled, hunching over before standing back up and raising both its fists above its head. <p>Samuel didn't falter. He grabbed both the alien's wrists pulled them down, thrusting his knee forward as he did so. The result was that his knee was practically <strong>buried<strong> in the Brute's abdomen. As the beast drew back, coughing and gagging, he raised his knee straight up into its chin. And then, with the Chieftain standing there, coughing and looking up into the sky, Samuel grabbed it by the neck and pinned it up against the wall of the office-building.

"You shot my **\*\*teammates\*\***." He growled under his breath. Then, while he held the Brute against the wall with his left hand, he started punching it hard in the gut with his right. "You shot my **\*\*friends\*\***." He punched harder, feeling the heavy, ornate armor cracking under the pressure.

The Brute roared something in between coughs that sounded like "Demon," but Samuel didn't let up. He punched harder until he stopped, rearing back. "This one's for Blaine." He said without an ounce of emotion, punching the Brute so hard that the wall behind it started to crack.

"De-**\*\*Demon\*\***!" it coughed.

"And this one's for Zeke!" He punched as hard as he could, and the wall cracked once again. "And thisâ€¦" Samuel paused, rearing back, **\*\*searing\*\*** with rage. "This is for anything I missed!" With that, he punched again and the armor broke down the middle as the wall followed suit. The old, metallic wall of the office-building crumbled and the Brute was sent skidding across the floor, howling in agony.

Samuel walked up to it as it tried to stand and put his boot firmly on the alien's chest. Next, he bent down and ripped the Chieftain's elaborate headdress from its face, cutting the alien with its sharp edges without even meaning to. He was left staring down at the Brute's shaved face and its fearful, angry eyes.

The creature roared again, and Samuel raised his right foot and brought it down straight on the alien's skull. Silence filled the room except for his own panting for breath. It was over. The Brute was dead. His team was safe.

That was what mattered.

\* \* \*

>"Where are they?" the Spartan the human's called Stephanie asked, referring to a small girl and her mother that she had apparently saved earlier in the day. U'svere hadn't seen them, but had heard the Marines talking. <p>"I don't know," the humans' Captain, Burns, said. "I think they went upstairs when the Brutes made their last real attempt at getting in about twenty minutes ago."<p>

"I'm sure they're okay." the other Spartan, Victoria, said. Before anyone could respond, however, U'svere heard a scream from above, echoing down the stairs.

"The girl!" Stephanie yelled, taking off for the stairs. Victoria was on her heels before she even hit the first step.

"\*\*Brutes\*\*," U'svere growled, drawing his Energy Sword and taking off after them. Victoria quickly overtook Stephanie and jumped clean over her before disappearing from sight. U'svere followed the other, larger Spartan all the way up the steps to the third floor.

He rounded the corner after Stephanie and stopped, stunned. The door to the steps leading up to the roof was open and, inside, he could see Vano's body, torn and bloody. In the hallway leading to the door was Victoria, waging war with a half-dozen Brute Majors and a Captain.

"Cowards!" the Elite yelled, activating the sword and charging into the fray. He gutted the first Major he saw, absolutely shredding its body and leaving it in a heap on the floor. He was about to attack another when something caught his eye. Something was shimmering inside one of the rooms on the left side of the hall. U'svere scowled.

\_Active Camouflage\_He thought, running into the room. He caught a shimmer to his left and ran the sword through it, shorting out a Brute's invisibility and cutting it from the abdomen to the neck.

The Commander felt something walking behind him and turned around instinctively, bringing both hands down hard on a crouched Brute's skull. The alien fell to the ground and U'svere crushed its skull beneath his boot.

Suddenly, he caught a red light out of the corner of his eye, near a large window that made up the entire east wall of the room. Immediately, the Commander realized that one of the Brutes was carrying a Firebomb Grenade. Without even turning to face the new threat, he primed a Plasma Grenade and threw it toward the light.

The shining blue sphere stuck to a cloaked Brute and it roared out in

rage before it suddenly exploded, engulfed by the radiating plasma. As the window behind the Brute shattered, the heat caused the creature's grenades to overcook and two Firebombs exploded, catching three nearby Brutes on fire and shorting their camouflage as well.

The first Brute ran at U'svere almost instantly, brandishing a Brute Spiker, but the Sangheili dodged the beast's swing and sank the Energy Sword deep into its abdomen. The Elite spun a full circle, ending with the first beast's entrails spread across the floor and U'svere facing the last two Brutes: a Captain and another Major.

Without warning, the Captain shoved the lesser Brute toward U'svere, who was caught off-guard and got a crushing blow to the face from the primate's fist. He'd taken worse, however, and only roared at the beast before thrusting both fists into its gut, ramming it up against a wall as its Power Armor failed and fell off.

The Brute started to roar, but U'svere pulled out his Plasma Rifle and shoved it into the beast's mouth, firing three times and letting the soldier fall to the ground in a burning, melting pile of alien organs and tissue.

The SpecOps Elite turned to the blue-armored Captain and let out a triumphant roar, spreading his mandibles wide and glaring at the hideous creature.

"Miserable Elite," the Brute growled, dropping its Brute Shot to the ground and motioning for the Sangheili to do the same and fight it on equal terms.

U'svere **\*\*knew\*\*** that he couldn't overpower the Brute without a weapon, but he had no choice. Honor was as important as victory, if not more so. He deactivated the Energy Sword and attached it to his armor, roaring again.

Without warning, the Brute lunged forward from the window. U'svere raised his arms to block, but was taken off-guard again when the Brute suddenly disappeared as its Active Camouflage reactivated. He could still see the beast's shimmering outline, but not well enough to see the creature's right arm come crashing into his helmet. The Elite was sent rolling across the floor, into the wall.

"Foul creature," he growled, standing up. He glanced around the room, but could see nothing. He cursed. As long as the Brute remained completely still, there'd be no finding him.

Suddenly, he felt another blow to his right side as the Brute tried to tackle him. Barely, U'svere stayed on his feet, eventually locking hands with the larger alien when its Active Camouflage failed and pushing the beast with all his might. It was no use, however: the Brute, **\*\*physically\*\***, was stronger than he was. There was no getting around that.

The Brute roared proudly, pushing U'svere toward the edge of the now-shattered window. The Elite's whole body hurt and he wanted to groan or yell, but forced himself to only growl at his adversary. There was no honor in showing his pain.

Finally, when he was only a foot from the window, a plan formed in the SpecOps Elite's mind, and he clicked his mandibles loudly. When the Brute looked down to him, he let his legs go and landed flat on his back before bringing his feet up into the air and launching the Brute over him, out the window. The Covenant soldier howled as it flew out and landed on the ground.

U'svere stood up and looked out the window. The Brute had landed on its neck and was twisted at an odd, uncomfortable angle. There was no need to go and finish anything. The creature was already dead.

Catching his breath, U'svere drew his Energy Sword and looked around the room carefully for any signs of camouflaged soldiers. When he was satisfied that there were none, he crept back into the hall.

And he stopped.

Victoria was in the middle of the hall, surrounded by broken alien bodies bleeding from hundreds of cuts and wounds. At the far end of the hall, the door to the stairs was closed, but the bodies of two Brutes were essentially **\*\*buried\*\*** in the wall. Stephanie was there, her fists clenched in tight balls.

And, at the stairs leading to the ground-level of the base, were a human woman and a small child, shaken, but otherwise alright.

U'svere smiled as he walked over to a window overlooking the street. On the ground, he could see Ahrmonro and the leader of the Spartans, Samuel, walking with three others back to the base, two of which were limping, but alive.

He couldn't believe it. The battle was over. There had been casualties, but they had won it against impossible odds. Somehow, it was done.

The Horde was defeated.

The Brutes had failed.

He smiled again, clicking his mandibles. Perhaps there **\*\*was\*\*** hope for the humans and the Sangheili to work together after all.

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: Well, the Horde has fallen, and the tenuous friendships between the Sangheili and the humans are getting a little stronger. Next time, the group is finishing their job and going straight for the Anti Air Guns! But, I'll tell you right now: things are not as simple as they seem. As they say in the movies: "Stay tuned!" lol.<strong>

**\*\*Anyways, let me know what you thought of this one, and I'll have the next one for you just as soon as I can get it done! Thanks all!\*\***

**\*\*Author's Notes: Surprise! Yeah, I figure everyone reading this probably thought I'd given up on Zulu Company. I swear to you all, I never once considered quitting on this, but you have to understand: I've written and then completely scrapped and REwritten this chapter 4 times in the past three weeks.\*\***

**\*\*And still, I hate it.\*\***

**\*\*Finally, I think, I've gotten it to the point where it's at least worth the time to read. As far as my usual chapter's go, I think it's a letdown (it was to me), and I apologize in advance. It's got some vital setup in it for the next real fight, but that's really the extent of it. I had a horrible time trying to get it to come out right. So, again, I apologize for the delay. I never thought I'd experience writer's block like this. Hopefully it won't hit me again.\*\***

**\*\*Also, to all who asked me to read/review a story that they might've done, you should know that I will have read them all by this Wednesday. I've been swamped with scholarship due-dates and other assignments, so I haven't gotten to them yet. Again, my sincere apologies. But, I promise, for those of you who have been kind enough to review nearly every chapter I've written (or EVERY chapter), I will return the favor.\*\***

**\*\*Now, quickly, to the reviews:\*\***

**\*\*WolfyWolf: Hey, thanks a lot for your review. lol, I wonder if you really do know what's coming next...hmmm. Anyways, tell whoever those ten people are that I'm sorry for the delay. I try to get them out as fast I can...really, I swear I do. lol\*\***

**\*\*Lord of the Trees: lol, yeah, I think I might've gone a little overboard with the 4 Spartans. It didn't originally work out that way, but I just kinda went with it. Don't expect it too often, lol. It's bad publicity for the Spartans. ;) Glad you liked the last fight scene. More are on the way!\*\***

**\*\*Suliac Griffin: hehehe, yeah, I still get a kick out of Samuel and the Ghost. I was actually fairly proud of that one. :) As for the Sangheili and the Spartans...yeah, it's really hard to avoid SOME kind of a relationship between them after a while. It won't be perfect, but I won't lie to you and say it won't be there. And, as to what you said about the differences between Zulu and the other Spartan groups...well, I remember the cargo bay too...lol. I wanted them to be a little different, a little more human. After all, that's why I neglected to write from the Master Chief's point of view...it's freakin' hard! lol. Thanks for reviewing!\*\***

**\*\*TheHuntedOne: Well, I'm sorry you disliked the whole thing. I read back through it and looked for parts you could've considered "cliche'." I found a few, but I couldn't find the whole chapter to be that way. However, to each their own. In regards to your other points:\*\***

**\*\*B: I don't believe that the Spartans are "immune" to much of anything. In Halo: CE, the Master Chief wakes up from an unconscious state after leaving the Pillar of Autumn and arriving on Halo. In Halo 2, Cortana wakes him up in the level Outskirts after the Pelican is shot down by the Scarab. In Halo 3, he's at least believed to be**

unconscious for a short time when he's found on the level Sierra 117 at the start of the game. \*\*

\*\*So, honestly, I don't think they're immune. The biofoam inside the MJOLNIR armor accounts for most injuries, but I believe that a good deal of blunt-force-trauma could easily cause a Spartan to go unconscious. Resistant? Yes. Immune? I don't believe so.\*\*

\*\*C: Blaine did plenty in the chapter before ("Heavy Metal") and I tried to get everyone else who DIDN'T have a major part involved this time around. In addition to that, he did deal with the Chieftain, and you should know that, while Ezekiel is MY favorite character, he did even less than Blaine did. And, what he did do (shoot a few Jackals), I provided no detail on for the sole purpose of keeping him out of the limelight for this chapter.\*\*

\*\*So, I apologize if you didn't like it. However, I suppose we can leave it at that, and I hope you enjoy ones to come a little more. Regardless, I do appreciate the review, as it was kept pretty polite. Thank you.\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Glad you liked the last chapter. Sorry this one took so long, but I hope you'll at least get a little bit of time in it while I get the next one out. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: I'm happy you enjoyed the action in the last one. This one won't be filled like that, but it'll give you the intro into the next real fight scene (which I hope EVERYONE will enjoy). Samuel, last chapter...yeah, I was ready to give him some time in the spotlight and let him tear into them a bit, so it was a good time for me writing it too. As for U'svere, he'll have greater parts coming up too, so don't think I'll forget him. ;)\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: lol, thanks Cory. Glad you liked the tension. ;) hehehe...tell me what you think of the next few.\*\*

\*\*rebelbullit04: Thanks very much for your review, once again. I'm happy that you liked Samuel's parts in the last one. He's the team's leader, but I haven't had too much for him up until recently. I intend to fix that, best I can. As for your last comment about your reviews: if you get a chance, I would love to hear from you. If not, I understand, and the best of luck to you when your reinstatement actually arrives (if it hasn't already). Thank you, from me and anyone reading this who would like to join in. Your service is one of the greatest that anyone could make, and I thank you very much for putting yourself on the line. God be with you. :)\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: lol, so you liked the tank-scene, huh? hehe, I enjoyed writing it...Also, on the roof of the store...well, I can imagine the Brutes doing it: after all, the stupid primates did it in Halo 3 too. Freakin' Firebombs. I'm also thrilled to have another Samuel fan. So is a friend of mine, I think...;)\*\*

\*\*P.S. - I apologize for not getting to your chapter sooner. I've been completely swamped and haven't even gotten to read a lot of the stories on FanFiction I normally keep up with. But, as said, I will get to it by Wednesday, and no later.\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Talk we did, lol. How you enjoying Oblivion?\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Hey, I'm glad my story was good enough to warrant someone else trying out their own. As I mentioned to The Great Valley Guardian, I haven't been able to get to any stories on here, but if you did end up putting yours up, I promise to read all that's there before Wednesday (and REVIEW, lol). And, finally: thank you for complimenting Zeke! He is my favorite character. Am I biased? A little. But "Zulu Company" is my world and I'm allowed to be. ;) So, thank you for your review and your compliments to Zeke.\*\*

**\*\*Hear that? I have a Zeke-fan! lol. ;)\*\***

**\*\*Lord of Purple:** So, you like the mono-y-mono fights, do you? (I hope that was spelled right...). Well, I promise to have more of them in the future. That's what it's about...taking what I wanted to write about and adding the parts everyone enjoys (and that I enjoy writing). Thankfully, the one-on-one fights fall into BOTH categories. Thanks for your compliments and your review!\*\*

**\*\*Nameless Desturction:** Well, thank you! lol.\*\*

**\*\*PandamanX:** Yeah, some of the Spartans need to be knocked around a bit, otherwise they get a big head (you all know which ones I'm talking about). As for the Elite...yeah, I was sorry to kill him off, but it seemed to fit for the vengeance purposes later on. :) Thanks very much!\*\*

**\*\*SupremeCommander:** Hello, new reviewer! Thank you for the compliment on my story and, as I said, I haven't been able to read much of anything the past few weeks, but I promise to read and review your story by Wednesday. Thanks, and sorry for the delay.\*\*

**\*\*Samson00:** Wow, you thought the review was late...not as late as ME! lol. No worries...and yeah, did you see? Sam's got some fans! Thanks a lot, man! (BTW: We lifting tomorrow?）\*\*

**\*\*Now, that all being said:** time for the chapter that has been written and rewritten more times than I can or care to count. I apologize, it's NOT all-that-and-a-bag-of-chips, like it SHOULD be for this amount of time, but it's FINALLY up, and I've got the good stuff coming. Sooner...I promise.\*\*

**\*\***

**\* \* \***

**><strong>**

**\*\*Chapter 30:\*\***

**\*\* - EVAC - \*\***

**\*\***

**\*\*0600 Hours - January 2, 2553\*\***

**\*\*Streets of Los Angeles, California\*\***

**\*\***

"How does it feel?" The medic from Captain Burns' squad asked carefully. He was inspecting the burns and dents on Blaine's armor, along with any damage that might've been done that wasn't visible.

It had been several hours since the Covenant Horde was finally eliminated, and after only a few minutes, the entire team, made up of seven Spartans, three Elites, and eleven Marines, had all fled the school and traveled about a half-mile, stopping in a hotel for some well-deserved rest and to check for injuries. Now, the dead of night had already passed, but the sun had yet to light up the streets of California again.

The white-armored Spartan shook his head, annoyed. "It's **\*\*fine\*\***." He snapped. "**\*\*I'm\*\*** fine. You can back off." He turned to Samuel. "Can we **\*\*please\*\*** get going now?"

Samuel shook his head. "Not until everyone's checked out," he said. Blaine knew better than to question him on such a matter.

Landon had already been checked out. He'd sustained moderate trauma from when the 'Hog had been blasted into the side of the department store and fell on top of him, but nothing more. It was the initial shock that had caused him to go unconscious more than anything else.

Plus, right after the battle ended, the Marines had contacted HIGHCOM and its extension near L.A., asking for immediate evacuation. Their request was granted and the team was given a set of coordinates a few miles south of the school they'd made their fortress.

"Fine," Blaine said. The medic moved from his back to his biomechanical chest, observing what Blaine knew had to be a nasty burn since he'd taken the hit without his shields.

"How about here?" The man asked. "Does that hurt?"

Blaine rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure you understand." He said. "My **\*\*entire\*\*** body from the abdomen **\*\*up\*\*** is biomechanical. The only stress I feel is when I put an excessive strain on the electronic and cybernetic parts. I don't **\*\*feel\*\*** physical pain, minus shock and major trauma, of course."

"Oh," the medic said. "So, you're-

"I'm fine. The MJOLNIR armor's AI is giving me all the status updates I need. Thanks."

The man nodded and moved to the third one in line, Jason.

"I've got an AI too." The Spartan said.

"But your torso and back are the problem," the medic said quickly. Someone had informed him that the cybernetic Spartans had differing robotic parts. Jason's biomechanical pieces extended only to his waist, but no one without prior knowledge could tell through the armor. Blaine glanced at Samuel.

"Just let him do his job." The giant said. "And don't make him take



any longer than he needs to. The Marines are scheduled for EVAC in a little over three hours. We've got a few miles to cover, and then we have the Anti-Aircraft Guns to deal with."

"You're fine." The medic said, motioning to Jason's back. "Portable readout says that you've sustained a couple of minor cracks, but the biofoam has dealt with most of it. You should be fine, provided you get some halfway-decent medical attention when your mission's over." He paused, and then added with a smile, "but, until then, **\*\*try\*\*** not to fly into any more titanium braces."

Jason nodded.

"Now," the Marine said, moving to Zeke, who was sitting on a desk with his arms crossed. He moved over to see the armor over Ezekiel's chest, moving his hand forward in an effort to get the Spartan to move his arms. "If you could ju-"

"Touch me and die." Zeke snapped. The medic almost tripped over himself backing up.

**\*\*Zeke\*\***," Samuel said. "Let him finish." He paused, likely waiting on a retort. When one didn't come, he added, **\*\*now\*\***."

The medic checked out his injuries. After a few minutes, the machine in his hand had taken X-rays and conducted a radiation-check. The man waved his hand dismissively. "You'll be fine." He said.

Zeke scoffed, turning to Samuel. **\*\*Told\*\*** you," he said.

"Don't **\*\*care\*\***." Samuel said. Ezekiel backed off.

Ahrmonro stepped forward, followed closely by the last two remaining Elites, U'svere and a blue-armored Minor called Tero Varuna. "We need to get going, Demon." He said, addressing Samuel. "We are in no condition to withstand another major attack, and the time for the humans' "EVAC" draws near."

"Split-lip's right." Zeke said. "Let's get the Hell outta here."

"I second that." Blaine said.

"Ditto," Victoria added.

Samuel raised his hands. "Alright," he said. "Let's go. We'll do double-checks on everyone's conditions when we get to the extraction-point."

"Agreed," Ahrmonro said.

Samuel turned to face the rest of the Spartans, who had all gathered at the front of the group. "Victoria," he said, "you've got point." He turned to Zeke. "You're in the rear."

"The **\*\*Hell\*\*** I am." Zeke snapped only half-challengingly. "The Covenant aren't going to catch us and attack from behind."

Samuel nodded. "I know. However, you're the "crack-shot" with the rifle. If they attack from the front, you should be able to hit them just fine."

Blaine smiled. "Unless you **\*\*can't\*\*** hit 'em," he said. "In which case, I'd be glad to show you how to aim the thing."

\* \* \*

>"Jeez," one of the Marines groaned, kicking the ground lightly, "how much further before we take a break?" <p>Samuel sighed, checking the time. They had just over an hour to reach their extraction-point and they still had over two miles to cover. "We're not stopping until EVAC picks you up." He said. "There's no time."<p>

The Marine muttered something foul, but Samuel ignored it. The truth was that they might've had time to stop if they had paced themselves better in the past hour. Twice they were passed by a contingent of Choppers and once a group of four Ghosts zoomed by. Both times, they were forced to crouch in the dark and wait for them to pass. The last thing they needed was a group of Covenant reinforcements between them and their destination.

To make matters worse, two of the Marines were being carried in stretchers and three more were limping at a pace that made the Spartans cringe. The Marines carrying the stretchers kept wanting to rest, but neither the Spartans nor the Sangheili were going to put their guns down long enough to carry them.

"Sam," Victoria said from beside him. Samuel turned toward her but didn't slow down.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Gael's got bad news." She said solemnly. Samuel sighed.

"What is it?"

"UNSC satellites and monitors have picked up a decent-sized contingent of Covenant behind us. They're moving fast enough to get within eyesight of us in about ten minutes. We either need to speed up or take cover."

Samuel checked the time on his HUD. They had an hour and twenty minutes before they were scheduled for EVAC and more than two miles to go. For a Spartan, it was laughable. For a group of injured Marines who had to walk slowly both due to their health and for fear of alerting any Covenant troops in the area, it was a real time-crunch.

"Alright," he said. The giant motioned to a motel at the end of the street. "We'll take cover in there until they pass us. After that, wait a few minutes, send you or Zeke forward to scout it, and then we'll get going again. That way-"

"We can't wait, Sam." Jason said, interrupting him. Samuel didn't like it, but stayed calm and let him speak. "We're not making good time anyway. If we stop long enough for this contingent to go by, we won't have a dog's chance in Hell of reaching the extraction-point in time."

Samuel shook his head. "There's no choice, Jason." He said, mildly annoyed. None of the soldiers, Spartans and Marines alike, had slept

in what felt like days and it was beginning to play on their nerves. "We don't have the strength or the weaponry to fight against another Horde. If any of them sends a signal to the rest of the aliens in town, we're as good as \*\*dead\*\*."

Jason nodded, backing down slightly. "You're the boss." He said. "I just don't know how we're gonna manage."

"We'll figure it out. In the meantime, let's get ready. They'll pass us soon." Samuel walked up to the door of the motel and opened it for everyone, watching them all go in. The line ended with Ezekiel, who stopped once he was inside.

"We can take 'em," he said coldly. "Everyone's tired, but you know as well as I do that, if we had to, we could take on another Horde, no problem."

Samuel nodded. "Yeah," he said, "I know we \*\*could\*\*. And, if we have to, we'll do it in a few minutes. If we don't have to, though, I'm not gonna go into this looking for a fight."

The black-armored Spartan nodded slowly. "Figured you were thinking something like that," he said.

"There aren't very many of them, are there?" Stephanie said quietly. She was counting the number of soldiers in the Covenant's latest contingent and was, to say the least, disappointed. There were only a handful of Choppers, a lone Prowler, three Jackal Snipers and about two-dozen foot soldiers.

"No," Samuel said, "there aren't."

"Soâ€¦" Jason started anxiously, giving Samuel a chance to answer. "Are we gonna take 'em?"

The giant Spartan sighed. "Yeah," he said, "we'll take 'em. It'll be easier than letting them pass by and worrying about them later." He paused and turned towards the group. "I need three people to go back behind and take sniping-duty. Zeke, Victoria and-"

"I will go." The silver-armored Sangheili, U'svere, said. Stephanie saw that he was carrying an alien weapon: the Beam Rifle.

"Well, Hell!" A Marine with an Australian accent said loudly, stepping forward. "You can't go sniping with that!" The man held up an S2 Sniper Rifle in front of him, motioning for the Elite to take it.

For a second, U'svere appeared uncomfortable, but quickly regained his composure, took the weapon, and clicked his mandibles quietly. "Thank you." He said with just an ounce of discomfort.

Samuel nodded, stepping forward and interrupting them. "Okay," he said, "here's the plan: you three circle around behind them. When you're sure nothing is following them, take aim. Hit the higher-ranking Brutes first; that'll limit their chances of calling in backup."

Ezekiel scoffed. "And what should I take aim for once the excitement of that great two-\*\*seconds\*\* you just thought up wears

off?"

"Anything you can find," he said.

\* \* \*

>Rakittus let out a low growl, getting the attention of a pair of particularly-lazy nearby Grunts. "Stay alert," he snapped, "or the Jackals will have a <strong>snack</strong> for the trip home."

The Grunts squeaked and squealed for a moment, reaching down for their Plasma Pistols but knowing better than to draw them. Rakittus smiled behind his ornate headdress.

\_Those humans are close,\_ he thought, \_they can't have gone very far from their last point of resistance.\_ He smiled again, baring his teeth. \_Several of them are injured, after all.\_

CRACK!

CRACK!

"What-"

CRACK!

"Who-"

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

Just like that, all three of the Jackal Snipers fell to the ground and Rakittus watched as a pair of Brute Captains dropped as well. He turned a half-circle to look behind him, down the street that his contingent had just come down.

"Demons!" one his Brute Majors yelled before his head promptly exploded as another 'CRACK!' sounded in the air. In the pitch dark, Rakittus could barely make out two shapes in the distance. One was Sangheili, the other a Demon.

"Cursed hu-"

CRACK!

The Brute Chieftain felt his helmet be jammed sideways as another shot tore through the air and connected with his shields. It didn't come from either of the two soldiers he'd seen though. Squinting in the darkness as electricity trickled down his Power Armor, Rakittus could barely make out a third soldier at the end of the street, this one clad in armor as dark as night.

"Kill them!" The Chieftain managed to yell before yet another shot echoed through the street and tore his helmet clean off his head. The Brute staggered, knowing all-too-well what was coming. Rakittus reached for the Flare mounted to his armor, gripping the spherical device and-

CRACK!

\* \* \*

>The gold-armored Chieftain's head exploded as the third shot cut through the air and penetrated its skull. Victoria smiled wickedly.  
<p><em>Another one bites the dust,<em> she thought as five Brute Choppers and a single Prowler started for them from across the street.

"Time to go," Zeke said beside her, snapping his rifle to his back and breaking into a run. The Elite, U'svere, followed suit. Victoria sighed, putting the rifle on her back and taking off as well.

"We should split up." U'svere said as they rounded a corner into another ruined city block. He motioned to a pair of buildings on their right.

"Sounds good to me," Ezekiel said, dashing toward one of them, a multi-story department store with one full wall completely destroyed on the west side.

"We'll take that one," Victoria said to the Elite, pointing to a huge building that looked like what could be City Hall. The place had six enormous catacombs out front and an ancient building style.

At that second, the six Covenant crafts rounded the corner and began firing with everything they had. Victoria felt her shields flicker as a stray bolt from the Prowler's Plasma Turret connected with her back.

Speeding up, she ran up to the building and watched as the Sangheili went around to the structure's side with a pair of Choppers hot on his tail. Silently, she wished him the best and crashed through a pair of glass doors into the main lobby.

"Wretched humans!" one of the aliens yelled, its voice carrying all the way into the huge, open lobby. Victoria looked around for any sort of cover, but the whole area was barren except for a set of half-a-dozen catacombs and a door at the far side. Shrugging, she took off for one of the two closest to the middle of the room and waited.

As one of the walls behind her shattered, Victoria heard the Brutes roaring in rage. "Where'd it go?" One growled, revving the Chopper's engine.

"There!" a deep voice echoed, and Victoria assumed the Brute was pointing at the door at the other side of the room. That instant, the three Choppers started up again and she could feel the spikes digging into the ground behind her.

\_Alright,\_ she thought, feeling them getting closer and closer,  
\_threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|\_

On each side of her, the front spikes of a Chopper came barreling forward, tearing the ground to shreds. With her arms bent up in front of her face, she thrust them out to her sides and, for a split-second, felt nothing. Then, as the Choppers passed, she felt a moment's resistance as her plasma-coated blades connected with the Brutes. A second later, the two crafts crashed on their sides in front of her, piloted by a pair of headless aliens.

Victoria smiled behind her visor. "All too easy," she whispered as the third Chopper became visible off to her left. The Brute realized immediately that its brethren were no longer driving and angled the huge spiked wheel toward her.

"Die, human scum!"

She laughed as the alien craft boosted straight for her. "I don't think so."

At the last second as the Chopper closed in, Victoria bent her knees and did a full back-flip, digging in the blades on her knees into the catacomb behind her at a downward angle as the Chopper crashed into it. The stone shook, but held.

"Demo-" The Brute started to roar again, lifting its head, but stopped abruptly when it looked up. The Sniper Rifle was pointed straight at it, the nose of its barrel mere centimeters from the alien's face.

CRACK!

\* \* \*

>"Come on, <strong>freaks<strong>!" Ezekiel yelled as he ran through the halls of the department store. The Prowler had crashed into one of the walls and now the four Brutes were chasing him on foot.

He saw a flight of stairs, but ignored it. He didn't want to be caught in a on a staircase with the four of them if he could avoid it. Ezekiel kept running until he saw something that caught his eye: an open elevator shaft.

\_Bingo,\_ he thought, pulling the Gravity Lift from his back. He ran for the door to the shaft and threw the lift inside so that it was fully activated by the time he reached it. The black-clad Spartan ran into the lift, jumping as he did so.

One thing he hadn't counted on, however, was that the doors to the second floor would be closed.

"Damn it," he snapped, bending his knees and pressing his feet up against wall as he reached the top of his jump. He pushed hard into the wall and then released, flipping backwards and hitting the opposite side with his legs bent once again. This time he pushed off and flew up at a greater angle, landing solidly on the floor of the third story.

Suddenly, a horrible roar echoed from the shaft and Ezekiel turned around to see that the four Brutes were stuck, floating at the top of the Gravity Lift's beam. He smiled.

"Too bad your "all-knowing" Prophets didn't give you those Jump Packs, huh?" He asked smugly, priming a pair of Plasma Grenades and dropping them down the shaft.

At that, Demon began talking. "Threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|"

Two simultaneous detonations occurred in the shaft, sending blinding

blue light up to the otherwise-dark third story. Ezekiel felt the familiar smirk crawl across his face. "Pathetic," he said.

\* \* \*

>"Run! Little people first!" A red-armored Grunt yelled before three rounds for the Battle Rifle promptly found its skull. Samuel took aim and fired again into a group of the aliens, the spread of the rifle successfully taking two of the creatures with one burst. <p>He turned to see the Field Master doing battle with a pair of Brute Majors, dodging strikes from their Spikers and lunging back with his Energy Sword. Samuel knew it was hopeless: a dozen of the Brutes couldn't have touched Ahrmonro.<p>

He was about to take aim again, when, out of the corner of his eye, Samuel saw a trio of Brutes fly through the air from a group of about ten of them. A second later, as he tried to focus on the group through the smoke and gunfire that was erupting in the street, another pair of aliens were sent careening through the air. Their corpses landed mangled on the road ten meters away.

"I said **\*\*back\*\***! **\*\*the\*\*** **\*\*Hell\*\***! **\*\*up\*\***!" Blaine's voice echoed in Samuel's head. The other Spartan apparently didn't care who heard him as he brought the huge Gravity Hammer down again, crushing the body of another alien.

As the last of the group fell, the white-armored Spartan ran toward Samuel, holding the hammer in his hands. Samuel was puzzled. He'd done a lot of damage for someone using, basically, a stick.

"I thought that you said the battery was empty." He said, motioning to the hammer. Blaine stared at it for a moment.

"It is." He said plainly.

Samuel shook his head, dumbfounded. Blaine could do with a hammer what no one else would even attempt.

BOOM!

Something detonated in the middle of the street and Samuel turned to see nothing but a huge cloud of smoke with seven Brutes standing in a circle around it. In the smoke, however, his HUD had an indicator with Landon's number on it.

"Landon!" Blaine said, lifting the hammer high above his head. Samuel took out his Shotgun and prepared to move, but paused when, at once, all seven aliens fired their weapons into the smoke. Three of them had Spikers, two had Brute shots, and still two more had a pair of Carbines that were being fired into the cloud of smoke where Landon was trapped.

Samuel sprinted for the spot with Blaine right behind him, firing the Shotgun for no other reason than to draw the attention of the Brutes. They stopped firing when he and Blaine were still a dozen meters away, but before the Spartans could get any closer, the smoke was suddenly blown out to the sides and Landon came charging into the fray, both his arm-shields glowing a pale red.

The biomechanical soldier ran straight for the nearest Captain,

plowing the surprised alien over and crushing it, armor and all, beneath his boots. As the alien's head was smashed under him, he brought the Rocket Launcher he was carrying up to his shoulder and fired both the loaded projectiles: a pair of HEAT rockets. Each one caught a Brute Major, and the number of aliens left alive was suddenly down to four.

By this time, Samuel had reached the other Captain, and the unlucky Brute was still focused on its two fallen packmates. The giant Spartan walked up behind the alien and pressed the Shotgun hard into its back.

BANG!

The first shot tore through the alien's Power Armor and caused it to turn around as it staggered back. Samuel pumped the gun.

BANG!

The second shot tore a huge, gushing wound in the soldier's chest. As the Brute staggered again, Samuel took a step forward, pushed the barrel of the Shotgun into its mouth and fired once more.

\* \* \*

>"Where's the Elite?" Ezekiel asked, glancing back and forth. Victoria shook her head. <p>"I don't know," she said, looking as well. They'd successfully handled the Brutes that had followed them in Choppers and a Prowler, but the SpecOps Commander, U'svere, hadn't made an appearance since they'd split up.<p>

Victoria couldn't help but wonder if something had happened to the Sangheili. Granted, he was an experienced warrior, but these were trying times: no one had slept; the Elite would've been outgunned and outnumbered; and, worst of all, he'd have had no way to call for help if he had actually needed it.

"We need t-"

"Ezekiel, Victoria, U'svere," Samuel's voice echoed in her helmet. "Can any of you hear me?"

"We hear ya, Goliath." Zeke said. "What's up?"

"We're done here. How close are you? We need to get going."

"We're still a few blocks away," Victoria said. "But we can't go yet: we can't find U'svere."

"What?"

"U'svere," she repeated, "we split up and now we can't find him." She heard Samuel sigh at the other end of the connection. It sounded tired and bitter.

"Alright," he said after a moment, "keep looking for him. Ahrmonro says that it's not likely he'd have fallen to a pair of Brutes. We'll drop the Marines off." He paused, then continued, "if you find him, take off for the AA Guns and just meet us there."



"Got it," she said. The connection cut out.

"Great," Ezekiel scowled, "\*\*\*now\*\* we have hunting to doâ€|and it's not even the \*\*fun\*\* kind."

\* \* \*

>"This is it," Jason said, looking up into the sky. They'd made good time after the last contingent of Covenant soldiers and now the sun was just starting to show on the horizon. That meant that the dropship should be approaching any moment. <p>"Is everyone ready to go?" Samuel asked, looking to each of the eleven remaining Marines, including Captain Burns. Each of them nodded.<p>

"We're ready," Burns said, "but only if you guys are sure you wouldn't like a little help. A few of us are still in good enough to condition to give you support."

Jason rolled his eyes beneath his helmet. He shared Ezekiel's view on the idea of having "support" from the Marines: keep them as far away from the Spartans as possible.

"Thanks anyway, Captain," Samuel answered, "but we've got to make some serious tracks as soon as you're off the ground. It's almost dawn and the AA Guns are still up and running."

Burns nodded. "I understand," he said. "Good luck."

As the words left his mouth, Jason heard the familiar sound of a Pelican coming from the south. He stared into the sky and watched as the nose of the dropship appeared on the horizon. Moments later, it was lowering into the city square.

"Well," Burns said as the other ten Marines hopped quickly into the back, "I guess this is it." He looked at Samuel and then to Jason, "I appreciate all the help you guys gave us back there."

"Forget about it," Jason said casually.

The Captain nodded and got into the dropship. The engines roared again as the Pelican began to lift off the ground. It rose higher and higher, until it was above even the highest of the remaining office-buildings. And then, it took off.

"Well," Blaine said, getting everyone's attention, "I guess that's it then."

"Yep," Samuel said, "now we go and meet up with the others. We've still got the AA Guns to deal with."

The Field Master was standing beside him and clicked his mandibles loudly. "I'm going to enjoy this." He said. "The Brutes will have no-

BOOM!

Something exploded above them, and Jason looked to the sky to see smoke from the tail-end of the Pelican that had just departed. Behind it, a dozen Banshees were closing in, firing their Plasma Cannons even before they were close.

"No," Jason whispered almost inaudibly as the Banshees got within firing range. Each of them shot their Fuel Rod Cannons directly at the fleeing Pelican, and it detonated in the sky, falling down, below the Spartans' views, into the streets.

"\*\*Damn it all\*\*." Blaine growled. "Not again."

Jason looked down at the ground. Yes, \*\*again\*\*. That team of Marines had come so far and survived so much only to be attacked one more time.

"He could've made it." Samuel mumbled.

"What?"

"The Captain: he \*\*wanted\*\* to come with us. I refused."

Jason shook his head, but Landon got the words out first. "Don't even \*\*think\*\* of trying to take the blame for that. He made his own decisions. For you to think that \*\*yours\*\* had any impact on \*\*his\*\* choice is an insult and a waste of all our times."

"I \*\*know\*\* that," Samuel said seriously. "But I also know that he would've come with us, had I let him."

"\*\*No,\*\* he wouldn't have." Blaine interjected. "I'd have to told him to get the \*\*Hell\*\* away from me." Jason could see he was trying hard to lighten the situation, but the rising smoke and the smell of burning metal were making it hard.

"Just forget it," Jason said. "We have to meet the others. You know Zeke: if we're late and he takes the guns out without us, we'll never hear the end of it."

\* \* \*

>"Should we move on to the next one?" Victoria asked quietly. Her and Ezekiel had found U'svere shortly after their chat with Samuel and then moved on to the first AA Gun as instructed, but now the machine was nothing but dust and they'd heard nothing from the other Spartans. <p>"I say we move for it," Ezekiel said, "but we'll wait an hour. If we don't hear from the others by then, we take it, move on, and repeat."<p>

Victoria nodded. "Okay."

"Agreed," the Elite said.

Victoria took off, running at half-speed through the ruined city streets as the sun became more and more visible over the horizon. She'd only gotten a few hundred yards when a voice sounded in her head.

"Spartans," the voice was male, deep and low. "We have a change of plans. Leave the Anti-Air Guns. They're no longer out primary concern."

Victoria heard Ezekiel scoff loudly behind her. "What the Hell does that mean?"

"The Covenant have just deployed additional forces. Worse than that, these particular forces are capable of blasting the Research Station's titanium walls into ash. Give us your locations and we'll send in air-transport."

Victoria was puzzled. It didn't make sense. What kind of force could cause HIGHCOM to cancel a direct order just as the Spartans were about to-

BOOM!

The ground started to shake violently, as if the whole area was being hit with an earthquake.

"Alright," Zeke growled, "now what the **\*\*Hell\*\*** was that?"

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: So, that's it for this time around. One final apology for the delay, and I promise the next one will have much more action and will be out MUCH sooner. Thanks for reading, and I hope everyone is still with me!<strong>

## 32. Chapter 31: Scarabs

**\*\*Author's Notes: Well, here's number 31! I'm much more pleased with how this chapter turned out than with the last one, although I'd like to say up front: anyone who gave me a positive review on the last one, whether you genuinely liked it or were just sugar-coating it for me, thank you! I still loathe that chapter, but the compliments made me feel like it wasn't a total failure, lol. So, thanks very much for that!\*\***

**\*\*Now, first, as always, Reviews!\*\***

**\*\*killerman83ca: Wow, lol, I didn't think it took you long to get a review in at all. :) Thanks very much!\*\***

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: Hey, I'm glad you actually enjoyed the last chapter (as can be noted, I clearly didn't, lol). I can honestly say, if you like Sam with a Shotgun, then you'll love this next one. Victoria's got her own show happening too, lol.\*\***

**\*\*Also: I read your story and was finally able to review it tonight. I apologize for the delay but, as I noted on the review, FanFiction wasn't agreeing with me for...pretty much the whole week. I just got to finish reading Snowbound today. But, it's up there, as soon as the server realizes it. Great story thus far, my friend!\*\***

**\*\*Lecter 42: Hi! I'm always happy to have someone new giving me their insight on this story! I'm glad you liked (for the most part?) what you've read so far. In regards to the bolded words: I've tried to shy away from them more and more as the story goes on (though, I will admit, I've had some relapses, lol). Umm, I tried to take your advice a little for this chapter. There should be less than about a dozen bolded words in the whole thing (about 9,000 words), and they're all in someone's speech, where I like to have the added emphasis. Also, I'm not sure I completely understand the comment you made about the**

chain of command within Zulu Company. I suppose, in regards to it, there wasn't a clear chain developed early because, for a while, no one was entirely sure who would survive augmentations and such, and who would not. Past that, several Spartans fell early on, but Samuel took charge very early in the story (chapter 14, if I recall). If that's not quite what you were getting at, please let me know. It's late and perhaps I'm not reading it right, lol.\*\*

\*\*But, thank you very much for your compliments on my writing. I hope you like the story enough to stick around and perhaps write a review or two when you get a chance. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: lol, you liked it too, huh? Well, I'm glad. That means it wasn't a failure after all, lol. I do apologize for the delay...I had a terrible time with it. As for your review being "short," trust me, I understand having a load of coursework and having other things that need done. If you just drop me a line that says you're still reading, I'll be happy. :) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: lol, thanks man. I know it wasn't great, but everyone is giving me the message that it wasn't as bad as I thought it was (minus your bro...he said it was kinda like someone else was writing it. Which, honestly...I'll agree with that. I still can't stand it, lol). Thanks for the comment!\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: lol, I WISH Victoria's moves were in a multi-billion dollar film. Actually, it wouldn't matter, since the whole thing takes place in a universe owned and copyrighted by someone else, lol. But still, I wouldn't mind a few of those dollars. ;) Samson00 and I were actually joking today about a Zulu Company "movie," lol. If ONLY I had the resources...Anyways, thanks for your compliments! I hope you like this next one...I actually do, for a change. ;)\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hola! Yeah, we talked about me and my Writer's Block, huh? That's okay. You've pretty much already read this next one. I hope everyone else likes it as much as you did, lol. Talk to ya later, man! Thanks again!\*\*

\*\*Bashbro: Hey, thanks very much! I hope your opinion continues to be so enthusiastic! It's good compliments like those that make me think I'm doing a decent job at this, lol.\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: Hey! Thank you for the compliments/review! As for your question: yes, I do have plans for the Hunters. In fact...you can expect to see them fairly soon, I promise. Oh, and about your story: I'm sorry it didn't get posted yet. I was looking forward to reading it. Do me a favor and keep me updated as to when you do get it, okay? Thanks!\*\*

\*\*P.S. - My Writer's Block is officially KIA...hehehehe.  
;)\*\*

\*\*WolfyWolf: Yuck, moving across country...bleh. I'm sorry. That's no fun. Think nothing of the "late" review, lol. I took three weeks to get my last chapter out! haha. Anyway, I'm glad you didn't think the chapter was as bad as I thought it was, lol. My hope is that, with that last one, I have nowhere to go but UP! lol. But thanks for your review, and I hope you get moved okay and with as little stress as possible, lol.\*\*

**\*\*AosUnderSol:** Hey, thank you for the compliment. As for your guesses...well, read on and you'll see how close/far you were to/from the truth.\*\*

**\*\*PandamanX:** Yeah, I know it was a necessary one, lol, that's why I wanted SO bad to get it right. You can't imagine how hard it was to get the dumb thing to the point where I could even bear to post it, lol. But I am glad that everyone took to it so well and had kind things to say about it. I thought about what you said in regards to character development and such, and I hope you can bear with me for one more chapter. ;) This next one is ALL action, but after this, there'll be a nice (short, but decent) break for the Spartans where I can get some more character conflict going on. So, one more my friend. And yes, I do have a plan, promise. :) There's a method to my madness (most of the time). Thanks a lot for your review!!!\*\*

**\*\*Thanks again to everyone who reviewed! Now, on to the next chapter, for Covenant forces so powerful that Zulu Company was actually reassigned at the last minute to take care of them so the Marines wouldn't have to! ;)\*\***

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 31:<strong>

â€" **\*\*Scarabs** â€"

\*\*\*\*1100 Hours - January 2, 2553\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*In the Air Above Los Angeles, California\*\*\*\*

"How many of them are there?" Zeke asked from the jump seat of the Hornet.

"The final count was fourteen." Jason answered from the cockpit. Samuel nodded slowly from the other jump seat, imagining that many of them. Never had he heard of any more than two being in the same area.

Scarabs. The Covenant had recently deployed over a dozen of them into the city streets surrounding the Research Station. Each one of the Scarabs was equipped with, among other things, a single main cannon that could cut right through the station's titanium walls without a moment's hesitation.

And, because of this, the Spartans were split up and were being flown to the Covenant machines closest to the station. Samuel, Jason, and Ezekiel were in one Hornet; Landon, Blaine and Victoria were in the other. Stephanie was in yet another of the flying crafts, but this one was taking her to the very edges of the Research Station in an effort to stop the Covenant from getting past the Marines working desperately to keep the area secure.

The three Sangheili, on the other hand, had been left down below to tend to the remaining Anti-Air Guns. It was under protest from the aliens, but Samuel believed that HIGHCOM still had trust-issues with the Elites. And, if HIGHCOM didn't, the Hornets' pilots sure as Hell did.

"The Marines say they've already taken down a few of them." Jason's voice echoed in the giant Spartan's ears. "It took a whole lot of manpower though, and a lot of lives were lost. That's why we're being reassigned."

"Sounds like fun," Zeke said sarcastically from the other seat. "So, how are we gonna do this?"

"Well, I was thinking, if you want, I could just drop the two of you off on a Scarab or two and go take another one out with the Hornet's guns. Then, when you finish, I can come back and pick you up. From what I hear, the big bugs aren't spaced too far apart."

Samuel pondered the idea for a moment. The Marines had come to them with guns-galore, and firepower was no longer a problem. However, none of them had slept and they were prone to mistakes. Jason's idea didn't allow for many of those.

"What do you think, Zeke?" Samuel asked.

"About boarding them from the air?"

"Yes."

"Sounds like the most fun I've had in days," Ezekiel said without an ounce of sarcasm. "I say we give it a shot."

"Well," Samuel said seriously, "we can, but one shot is all we'll get. No screw-ups."

"Who do I look like?" Zeke asked in an injured tone, "Blaine?"

Samuel shook his head. "Alright," he said, making up his mind as the first of the Scarabs came into view. "I'll go first." He paused, then addressed Zeke, "cover me."

"Consider yourself covered." Ezekiel answered, and Samuel heard the bolt click in his rifle. "Ezekiel Veron's complete insurance policy: one-hundred-percent safety against ugly-alien-encounters or your money back."

Sam rolled his eyes before examining what was in the streets in front of them. There were four Scarabs marching in a line toward the Research Station, each of them purple-colored, bulbous at the back and lower to the ground at the front. And, of course, each of them had the enormous green "eye" they'd become known for.

"Drop me off on the one at the far end of the line." Samuel said.

"Ten-four, Goliath," Jason answered. "I'll drop Zeke at the next one, then I'll handle number three. After that, I'll come pick you up—so take your time, okay?"

Samuel nodded. "Got it," he said as the Hornet flew over the first of the Scarabs. The Brutes and Grunts on the upper deck hollered and roared as the Spartans passed, firing their weapons occasionally even as the giant Anti-Aircraft Gun on the tip-top of the Scarab's rear

fired dozens of shots. Samuel got a strange sense of vertigo for a second as the Hornet spun sideways to avoid one of the shots.

A moment later, they'd passed over the second Scarab and were flying around the third. Again, the Covenant on-board went nuts, but could do nothing apart from scream and shoot madly into the sky. The AA Gun, on the other hand, provided even Jason with a relative challenge. The Hornet jerked a bit and Samuel watched as two missiles flew from the front of it and impacted with the Scarab's Anti-Air Gun. The gun wasn't destroyed, but it did stop firing for a few precious seconds.

"This one's yours, Sam!" Jason yelled as they passed over the body of the fourth Covenant machine. Samuel looked down and, without a word, jumped off the jump seat. He fell for a couple of seconds before landing right at the head of the Scarab's top deck, smack in the middle of a group of Covenant Brutes.

"Demon!" the closest one yelled, and then looked down to reach for the two weapons mounted to its thighs. Samuel recognized the weapons as Brute Maulers.

The giant Spartan immediately gripped the handles of the two weapons mounted to his back and brought them both to bear. The Brute looked up less than a second later, only to find two eight-gauge Shotguns pressing hard against its chest. It looked at Samuel and the Shotguns, then down at its now-puny-looking Maulers, and then back at the Shotguns once more, a look of total shock consuming its features.

"Mine's bigger," Samuel said with a smile, pulling both triggers at once. The combined impact sent the Brute staggering back, so much so that it stumbled right off the edge of the Scarab. As its last terrible howl echoed in the air, Samuel pumped both guns between his arms and his sides and turned to the next Brute in line.

This one was a blue-armored Brute Minor and Samuel could only smile as the twin Shotguns tore through the alien's shields and flesh effortlessly. The creature fell onto the deck with a pair of gaping holes in its abdomen, clawing futilely at the Spartan's feet.

Again he racked the Shotguns, and again Samuel turned to find the next Brute in line. Instead, however, he saw a red-armored Grunt running up to the main deck from the floor below, being followed by a gold-armored Brute Captain.

Samuel ran straight for the edge of the ramp that led down into the Scarab and waited around the corner of the wall. As the Grunt emerged, he ran right up to it and pressed both Shotguns into the chest of the Captain behind it. Immediately, the Grunt began to scream and the Brute let out a gasp, drawing back slightly. Smiling at the Brute's surprise, Samuel pulled the triggers.

Twin shots once again wreaked havoc on a Covenant soldier as the Brute's shields flickered and died almost instantly. The alien let out a roar as its Power Armor fell to pieces and it bent down to charge the Spartan, but Samuel was more than ready. He pumped the Shotguns a third time and let loose, absolutely shredding the creature's upper-body.

At his feet, the Grunt was still screaming.

Samuel looked down and re-loaded the Shotguns.

"Uh-uhâ€¦|" the Grunt stuttered, cowering as it looked up at his towering frame. "If okay with you, me need to go take pee."

\* \* \*

"Fire!" The gold-armored Chieftain, Maccinum, roared from the front of the Scarab as one of the humans' flying crafts hovered above them. Strallus, one of two Brute Majors assigned to guard the power core in the back of the Scarab, glanced around the corner and up at the flying vehicle.

The second he did so, however, a small sphere dropped down onto the deck and let out a blinding flash of light. The Brute Major put his hands to his eyes and pawed mercilessly at them as he shook his head, trying desperately to regain his vision.

Suddenly, the Scarab's alarm went off, sounding so loudly that its infernal beeping could be heard all across the area. A second later, the machine's legs buckled and Strallus felt the whole Scarab sink several meters as it lowered closer to the ground. Finally, his eyesight began to return and he looked around frantically to see what had caused so much damage. He turned around-

And froze.

The Scarab's power core, not six feet behind him, was obliterated. The shield had been shorted out, the cover ripped off, and the internal workings were torn to shreds. There was a single red light, flashing in sync with the alarm.

"Later, boys!" a human voice yelled from above. Strallus noticed the voice sounded female and looked up to the source.

In the sky above the Scarab, the humans' flying craft was quickly lifting higher into the air. On one side, standing casually and waving down to them, was one of the Demons, clad in indigo-colored armor.

Strallus started to roar, but the sound was drowned out by an enormous explosion as the Scarab's power core finally ruptured completely. The systems overloaded and half the city block detonated.

\* \* \*

"That wasn't even right," Landon said as he punched the thrusters on the Hornet to clear it from the blast-range of the Scarab that was exploding in the middle of the street, consuming everything around it.

"It was kinda boring." Victoria said. "Drop me off on that one over there." Landon saw her point to another Scarab half a mile away. He turned the Hornet and started flying toward it.

"What about me?" Blaine asked suddenly. "You sure as Hell better be dropping me off! I didn't sign up for this just to watch her have all



the fun."

"Blaine's got the next one." Landon said calmly. He spotted another pair of Scarabs four blocks away from the one they were already headed for. "Tell you what," he said, "I'll drop you both off on those two over there, and then I'll go handle the last one."

"Works for me," Blaine said.

"Me too," Victoria echoed.

Landon breathed deeply, hoping that things would continue to go off without any problems. He flew toward the pair of Scarabs and opened fire on the Brutes on-board, trying to soften them up for his comrades.

"Hey!" Blaine yelled. "What the Hell are you doing?"

"I'm just providing a little air-cover."

"Well, stop it!" He snapped. "We need to take these giant mechanical freaks down as quickly as possible, and that means dropping us off to do our job while you go and do yours." He paused, and then added, "and besides, where's the fun in it if we board an empty Scarab?"

Before he could offer a retort, Victoria added, "Blaine's right. It's barely any fun with the dozen or so Covenant soldiers they normally have on-board."

Landon sighed. "Fine," he said. He flew in low over the first of the two Scarabs. "Take off, one of you."

"Ladies first!" Victoria yelled, and jumped off. Landon heard Blaine mutter something under his breath.

"Here's yours," he said, flying over the second alien machine. A green acknowledgement light blinked in the corner of his HUD and he felt the Hornet get lighter as Blaine leapt off the jump seat.

Landon knew that he didn't have a lot of time before both Scarabs would be down, so he took off immediately for the third one and began slowly hovering around behind it. The huge machine started to turn around, but couldn't: the giant buildings lining the streets kept its legs almost entirely pinned into their forward-movements.

The Anti-Aircraft Gun on the back of the Scarab let loose on him, firing dozens of plasma bolts, but none of them were terribly damaging, and they arced slowly through the sky. He flew the Hornet in evasive maneuvers, back and forth, all the while unloading as many of the vehicle's guided missiles as he could.

After roughly thirty-seconds, the entire back covering that hid the Scarab's power core cracked and broke off, falling down into the street. Landon smiled and armed another pair of missiles.

"Let's see how tough these bugs really are." He said, and fired. The two guided rockets arced quickly through the air, cutting through the sky and hitting the core's shield with twin detonations. He grinned.

"Gameâ€|setâ€|match."

A second later, one last pair of missiles shot through the air and impacted the defenseless core. Its bright, blue, pulsating light suddenly changed to a heated red one and the Scarab's alarms sounded, drowning out every other sound in the area.

Landon didn't wait for the fireworks. He turned the Hornet 180-degrees and started flying back to the previous two Scarabs. Unfortunately, he'd only gotten halfway there when something impacted the back of the Hornet, detonating and splashing green energy around to the cockpit.

"Shit!" Landon cursed, turning around to face the Banshee that had fired at him. When he turned around, however, he saw something he hadn't bargained for: a squadron of six of the airborne Covenant crafts. "Ah, Hell," he said, focusing on a link with Blaine and Victoria, "you guys are gonna need to hoof it for a while. I got company up here, and it'd be inhospitable of me not to welcome them to the planet properly."

\* \* \*

Wagaw shook his head, screaming loudly as he did so. The Brute Captain leading the soldiers on the Scarab had yelled for all Grunts to fire at the airborne Demons above them, so the poor, green-armored Grunt had done just that. No sooner had he turned his Plasma Turret toward the humans' flying vehicle and prepared to shoot, however, than one of the Demons dropped a Flare out of it and he was suddenly blind.

Really, Wagaw had never thought that there could be anything worse than being on the enemy's home planet fighting with the Demons under the command of the Brutes. He now believed otherwise. The only thing worse was fighting the Demons on their home planet under the Brutesâ€|and being **\*\*blind\*\***. He could hear his superiors and his fellow Unggoy screaming and yellingâ€|and then nothing. The screams would just suddenly halt, as if they were cut off. Slowly, his vision began to return.

And he instantly wished that it hadn't.

There, on the upper-deck in front of him, were the bodies of a pair of Brutes and three of his brethren, all of them bleeding from literally dozens of gory wounds. The Brutes were hunched over-top of one of the Grunts and their necks were cut, leaving their heads hanging at strange angles. Someone â€" or something â€" had completely slaughtered them.

Wagaw screamed and took off the other way, toward the back of the Scarab and the power core. He rounded the corner and let out another shriek. The two Brute Majors that had been guarding the power core were hanging from the bulbous back of the Scarab, blood dripping from their carcasses.

"It's a nightmare!" Wagaw screamed and ran back the way he'd come. He drew his Plasma Pistol as he wandered back to where he'd started.

"Help!" another Unggoy shrieked somewhere below, in the bottom of the

Scarab. "Help me! The Demon is he-"

The screaming stopped. There was no whining, no last high-pitched shriek. It just stopped.

Wagaw was clutching his Plasma Pistol so hard he thought it would snap when he caught something moving at the back of the Scarab out of the corner of his eye. He turned in time to catch a black shadow move behind the wall, toward the core.

But he didn't dare chase it. "The Demon," he whispered, "he's here!"

"What Demon?" A deep, cold voice echoed behind him. Wagaw turned around instinctively and shrieked again. There, five inches away, was the Demon, clad in pitch-dark armor and holding the hilt of an Energy Sword like the Elites had always carried.

"Please!" the Grunt begged, staggering backwards. "You let me live?"

The Demon walked slowly toward him, completely silent.

Wagaw suddenly felt himself run out of room to back up. He was at the edge of the Scarab. And the Demon was still coming closer. "Bah!" The Grunt yelled, terrified, but trying hard to sound intimidating. "Demon feel stupid when I kill it!" At that, he raised the Plasma Pistol and fired several shots. They hit the Demon and dissipated against its armor.

"I don't think so." The voice said again. Suddenly, its legs and arms began to glow, surrounded in blue-white plasma. It bent each of its limbs, revealing two pairs of blades like the one in its hand, and suddenly Wagaw realized that he was about to die.

\* \* \*

"Come on, Zeke!" Samuel's voice echoed in Jason's headset. He'd already picked up the Spartan leader, and now they were just waiting on Ezekiel to finish his fun.

"Fine," the black-armored Spartan said. Jason brought the Hornet down next to the Scarab as Ezekiel disappeared around the back of it. A second later, the Scarab's legs buckled and its alarm began to sound. Ezekiel reappeared from the back and hopped into the empty jump seat.

"We're in a hurry." Samuel said from the other seat. "You know that."

"Calm down," the other Spartan retorted. "I was there for all of--"

"Three minutes," Samuel finished, "when you could've easily been done in three seconds."

"Alright," Zeke said, conceding, "my bad. I'll be quicker next time."

Jason was beginning to turn the Hornet around when he suddenly

remembered the fourth Scarab that was in the line they'd destroyed. With all the carnage, he'd almost forgotten.

"There's one more to take," Jason said over the communications link. "I can go overhead and drop you off if you wa-"

"Just bring us around to the back," Zeke interrupted, "but keep us at an angle."

"What?"

"Keep us low, level with the core, but around the back. Just angle us slightly off-center so I can see the core."

"You don't have to jump from there! I can take you over-"

"Damn it! I'm done jumping! Take my word for it." Lack of sleep and the added stress of being randomly reassigned were really starting to set in.

Jason sighed, irritated, and piloted the Hornet carefully around to the back of the last Scarab in the line, working quickly to evade shots from its Anti-Air Gun.

"Hold it still, will you?" Zeke snapped.

"I'm trying!" Jason said, working to keep the aircraft steady and still dodge the incoming plasma bolts. He pulled off to the right, dodging yet another and-

CRACK!

A white trail of smoke traced its way from the side of the Hornet right behind the Scarab's back-plating. Jason raised an eyebrow.

CRACK! CRACK!

\_What the Hell is he-\_

CRACK!

The Scarab followed the lead of each of the previous three, it's legs buckling and small blue explosions occurring all over its hide as the internal alarm began to sound. Jason backed the Hornet away quickly, barely escaping the blast-radius as the huge alien vehicle detonated.

Samuel spoke first. "Zeke," he said, pausing for a long time, as if he couldn't find the words. "Good shot."

"Thank you."

\* \* \*

"Go to Hell!" Landon yelled as a pair of missiles hit one of the Banshees. The purple aircraft exploded and fell from the sky. He'd already taken out one group of the fliersâ€¦now he was working on another set. This time, however, there were nine of the alien crafts zipping through the sky, and he was having more than a little

trouble.

The problem, he thought, was that the Hornet wasn't nearly as maneuverable as the Banshee was. The guns were better, hands-down, but the actual aircraft was modeled more like a helicopter than a mobile plane. The Banshees could do flips or boost through the air at twice their normal speed. If he tried any of that in a Hornet, Landon would find himself nothing more than an odd-colored stain on the concrete below.

BOOM!

Another shot hit the back of the Hornet, the Fuel Rod detonating and splashing his cockpit with plasma. Landon cursed under his breath as his suit's alarm went off and turned the Hornet around to face the new threat.

To his surprise, there were three Banshees, flying staggered through the air. Landon scrunched himself inside the cockpit to make room for the weapon he was carrying and he put it up on his lap, pointing at the windshield.

"Let's see how they like this." He muttered, flying the Hornet around to the side and turning their staggered formation into a straight line. He pulled the trigger on the gun and counted, "oneâ€|twoâ€|" At the end of "two" he punched the button that opened the entrance to the cockpit, flipping the giant window up and out of the way. "Three!"

A searing red laser cut through the air and engulfed each and every one of the three Banshees before him. Landon hit the button again and the window closed as he watched them detonate in the sky and fall to the ground in burning heaps.

"Ha-ha!" He laughed. "Welcome to Earth you ugly bastards!"

\* \* \*

Victoria pushed her legs to run as fast as they could carry her as the Scarab at the end of the street in front of her slowly crouched low to the ground. The Marines had been pelting the enormous machine and finally had damaged its legs enough to cause it to malfunction and stop moving.

And, while it was crouched, any Spartan could've jumped up into the lower-deck of it from the back with relative ease. Victoria, on the other hand, could jump to its full height without any problems and only cared about the malfunction because it meant that the damned thing wouldn't be moving up and down with the motion of its legs when she decided to jump for it.

Victoria was still thirty yards away when she saw the Brute Major standing at the rear-edge of the lower-deck, manning a Plasma Turret. She scowled and slowed down, waiting for the machine to recover from its injuries. After what seemed like an eternity, it stood up again and started walking.

"The Brutes inside will have let down their guards, now that the Scarab is back up on its feet." Gael said in her head. Victoria smiled.

"I know."

The female Spartan jumped as high and as far as she could and thrust her legs out in front of her. She made the jump easily and landed exactly where she wanted to: to the side of the Plasma Turret and at a hard angle. Because of her forward momentum, she slid on the ground, feet first, around the turret and between the legs of the Brute manning it. Smiling, she pulled her forearms in and let the bright blades on her elbows glisten as they sliced through the alien's shins.

The Brute roared and put its arms up, making the fatal mistake of letting go of the turret. Separated just below the knee, it fell forward and rolled off the back of the Scarab, howling loudly until it hit the ground.

Victoria stood up and took cover behind a large cylindrical catacomb that stretched from the center of the floor up to the ceiling of the lower-deck. No sooner had she gotten behind cover than a Captain carrying a Fuel Rod Cannon reared its ugly head from the bottom of the angled deck.

"Demon!" it howled. Victoria cursed. The beast had seen her before she was behind cover. It was a rookie mistake for her to make.

She waited until the alien's footsteps were almost right beside her, off to her right, and then gripped the catacomb with her left hand and spun around it. She brought her foot up and connected with the Captain's back, sending the wailing alien rolling off the edge, just as the other had done.

Still in a hurry, Victoria ran to the ramp that led to the upper-deck. Before she went up, however, she heard another set of feet on the deck above and caught a glimpse of a Brute's helmet at the top. The Spartan hid next to the ramp, behind the wall, and waited as the footsteps drew closer.

When the Covenant soldier's footsteps were almost right beside her, Victoria thrust her elbow back and upwards and felt resistance as the attached blade sunk deep into the chest of the Brute Major. The alien started to roar, but Victoria silenced it with a quick slice to its windpipe. She held it by the neck for only a second before dropping the carcass to the floor and running up the ramp.

Once on the upper-deck, Victoria turned and ran around one side of the Scarab, stopping only long enough to fling a Plasma Grenade at a turret-manning Grunt. The alien flailed and ran about for a moment before going up in blue flame.

"The Demon!" a Brute yelled, rounding the corner at the end of the walkway. The alien was carrying a Brute Shot in its arms.

Victoria smiled, bending her arms and letting the blades be covered in plasma. Gael started to speak, "Victoria, watch the explosives on this-

BOOM!

The Brute fired its weapon, but instead of the explosive coming at

her, as Victoria was used to them doing, it flew into the wall to her left, causing her to falter and almost fall from the narrow ledge.

BOOM!

This time, with her already off-balance, the grenade knocked her from the walkway. She reached her arm up and gripped the ledge with her left hand, hanging on for her life. She started to pull herself up when something hard crushed her hand.

"Demon," the Brute said, pushing its foot down hard on her fingers. Victoria's scowl turned to a glare and she reached for the weapon on her thigh. "Now," the Brute said, bending down so that its face was only two feet above her own, "die!"

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Three shots erupted from the Pistol's barrel. The first two did nothing but dispose of the alien's shields. The third, however, traveled through its open mouth and out the back of its head. Victoria pulled herself up as the Brute roared in agony and staggered back.

Without a word, the Spartan grabbed the howling Covenant soldier by the shoulders and spun around, flinging it over the side of the Scarab.

A few moments later, she was face-to-face with her second Scarab-power core.

"Another one down," Gael said in her mind as she thrust the blade on her left arm into the shield, shattering it. Victoria broke the small, metallic cover behind the shield and saw a bright blue light: the essence of the Scarab.

"Yep," she said, activating her Energy Sword, "another one down."

\* \* \*

"Fall back!" Stephanie yelled to the Marines behind her as another wave of Covenant came at them. Her small contingent was trying desperately to keep the countless aliens out of the Research Station, but now it seemed impossible.

When she had first arrived, she'd waged an all-out war with the Covenant soldiers already stationed outside the fortress and annihilated each and every one of them. However, soon after, they began sending in bigger and better soldiers, the climax being a pair of Fuel Rod Cannon-wielding Chieftains and a group of over two dozen Brute Captains armed with Brute Shots and Carbines.

Now, instead of being against the walls of the station using bunkers and titanium plates as cover, the Marines were taking cover just inside the doorway, working hard to shoot at the Covenant from the safety of the indoors. Stephanie had tried to fight them off on her own, and had done decent-enough job with her own Fuel Rod Cannon, but now she was out of ammo and her shields were down to nil.

"Status report!" she yelled into the communications link as she dove behind the very last titanium plate before the doorway. "Who's still alive?"

Several voices spoke at once, but Stephanie paid attention to only one thing: the blinking green lights in her HUD. There were four of them now. That meant that less than a fifth of the original team of Marines was still alive.

"Command," she said into the link, trying to hook up with her superiors, the men and women at HIGHCOM giving orders from the safety of their monitors. "Command, this is \*\*Spartan 002\*\* of Zulu Company. I need reinforcements. We're losing ground. I repeat: request backup."

"Spartan," a low voice answered. "You're going to have to wait. I'm afraid there's no one to send right now. As soon as your team has finished dealing with the Scarabs, you'll have your backup. Hold out until then."

And red light blinked once in the left corner of her vision, and the connection was terminated. Stephanie cursed.

"And just how the \*\*Hell\*\* am I supposed to do that?"

\* \* \*

"Blaine, are you down there?" Landon asked from the cockpit of the Hornet. He'd already picked up Victoria and was now waiting for Blaine. Unfortunately, the white-armored Spartan had elected to invade another Scarab from the bottom and work his way up, and Landon hadn't heard a word out of him in several minutes.

Even worse, Blaine hadn't come out of the lower deck, either.

"Come on!" Landon yelled. "Give me something, Blaine! Give me \*\*something\*\*!"

Suddenly, a pair of Brute Majors flew out of the back of the Scarab, landing in heaps on the ground behind the giant Covenant walker.

"Oh," Landon said, relaxing, "that works."

He watched from above, waiting patiently for the Spartan to show himself. After several moments, a Brute Captain armed with a Fuel Rod Cannon ran down the ramp from the upper-deck and disappeared from view.

"Um," Landon started, "Blaine--"

The Captain suddenly reappeared, soaring back up out of the lower-deck, above the ramp and rolling across the deck until it eventually fell off the front of the Scarab. At that same instant, three Grunts ran -- literally ran -- out of the back of the Scarab with their hands raised, screaming as they jumped to their deaths.

"Wow," Victoria said from the jump seat. "I'd say it's safe to say that he found a hammer sometime between now and when you dropped him



off earlier."

Landon nodded. "Damn right it is."

A few seconds later, Blaine walked up out of the lower-deck without so much as a scratch and proceeded directly to the back of the huge machine. Landon watched as he disappeared from view and the Scarab's alarm began to sound. Blaine came out from where the power core was located and hopped onto the open jump seat.

"Well," Blaine said casually, "that was fun."

Landon shook his head. "You could've gone just a little bit faster."

"I could have." He admitted.

"Hey," Victoria interrupted, "there's another Scarab off that way!" Landon could see her pointing from the cockpit. "Drop me off on it."

Landon nodded and turned the Hornet toward the Scarab. He'd gotten pretty good at dodging the Anti-Aircraft Gun mounted to the thing's rear and was able to get in right above the upper-deck without a problem.

"Give me a few minutes." Victoria said. "There aren't many left, so I'm gonna have a little fun with this one."

"Whatever," Landon said. He felt the weight of the Hornet shift as the female Spartan jumped off.

"Where to now?" Blaine asked.

Landon shook his head. "I don't know." He said. He searched the area for Scarabs, but only saw a few more, and they were all closer to Jason's team. He spun the Hornet in a full circle until something caught his eye. "Do you see that?"

"Yeah," Blaine said. "It's a Scarab." He paused, then added, "a big one."

"Oh Hell," Landon said, examining it closer. He realized suddenly that he'd been looking too closely and had missed the big picture: this Scarab was headed straight for the Research Station.

"Drop me off," Blaine said from the jump seat. "I'll take care of those Covie bastards myself."

\* \* \*

"There goes another one!" Jason laughed as he piloted the Hornet away from another exploding Scarab. So far, between Samuel, Ezekiel, and himself, they'd taken out eight of the mechanical monsters. To add to it, he believed that Landon, Victoria and Blaine had taken at least six.

Unfortunately, more of them had been dropping from orbit even as the first waves were destroyed. Jason still saw a few of them left.

The Hornet spun to the right and he got a good look at the enormous Research Station. Jason couldn't help himself: he shook his head in awe at the sight of it.

The building was easily as big as it had been described. It had to top one-hundred stories, he thought, and the fact that it widened as it got closer to the ground was something completely unheard of to Jason. At the top was the tip of the cone, probably wide enough for two or, at the most, three small rooms. The bottom, on the other hand, was big enough to house four football fields without a second thought.

He looked around the building, to the Phantoms that were landing nearby, dropping off Covenant reinforcements. Silently, Jason hoped that Stephanie was doing alright, moved on and-

"What the-"

He stopped cold. Approaching the structure from the east, where Landon had taken the other Hornet, coincidentally, was an enormous Scarab, bigger and colored differently than the others. This one was grey and was less bulbous at the end. It was taller and didn't have an open back, either.

It looked like the one the Master Chief had destroyed in New Mombassa.

"Is that an old-model Scarab?" Ezekiel asked from the jump seat.

"Yeah," Jason said. "I think it is."

"It's headed right for the station!" Samuel said. "We need to go, now!"

Jason nodded. "Got it," he said, "we're going! But I don't know if we can beat the damn thing there!"

\* \* \*

"Hurry up!" Zeke yelled from the other seat as they slowly started to close in on the Scarab. Samuel didn't know what they'd do to stop it in time to keep it from firing at the base, but he knew they needed to do it quickly. The giant mechanized menace was about a minute away from opening fire.

"Sam!" Zeke said. "Do you see what I see?"

Samuel shook his head, annoyed. "No, Zeke, I don't. I'm on the right. I can't see anything on the left due to the big \*\*cockpit\*\* in my way."

At that, the Hornet turned slightly sideways, but maintained a straight path for the Scarab. Instantly, Samuel's demeanor changed.

"More of them!" he said disbelievingly, seeing what Zeke had been talking about. Sure enough, there were two more Scarabs in a line, closing in on the Research Station. When all was said and done, if they kept a straight path, they'd be all of about a hundred feet away

from the big one when they fired.

"We can't get to all of them!" Zeke snapped. "There's just no way."

"I know." Samuel answered. Jason interrupted.

"We might be able to." He said. "If I drop one of you off at the big one and go straight for the others." He paused and, when no response came, added, "it's worth a **\*\*shot\*\***, damn it!"

"Fine," Samuel said. "Let's do it. We're out of time."

The Hornet started to cover the ground, but just couldn't get there fast enough. The enormous, old-model Scarab reached the station first and its green "eye" began to glow. Before it could even charge, however, the first of the other two Scarabs had closed in as well.

"Shit!" Jason yelled. "We're not gonna make it!"

"Damn it." Zeke scowled from the other seat. "Damn it all."

He watched as the smaller Scarab's front "eye" began to glow bright green. Before it could fire, however, something unexpected happened. The larger Scarab made a slight turn, away from the building, and opened fire on the newer, purple-colored one. Its giant green beam of superheated plasma burned through the air and impacted with the side of the smaller walker. The beam kept going, burning right through the Scarab and crippling it instantly. It detonated, collapsing and falling to pieces not even fifty-meters from the Research Station.

Suddenly, a voice shouted in Samuel's helmet. "Hell yeah!" the voice yelled. "Get the **\*\*Hell\*\*** off my planet, you miserable sons of-"

"Blaine!" Samuel yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Yes?"

"Are you where I think you are?"

"Damn right I am." He answered. "This is **\*\*Spartan 011\*\*** â€" Blaine Everson, the only human licensed to drive a Scarab on the **\*\*planet\*\***."

Zeke spoke up from the other side, sounding puzzled. "I thought the Scarabs were controlled without a crew nowadays."

Blaine laughed. "The new ones are. Fortunately for us, the Covenant apparently ran out of the newer models. It seems they wanted to shoot down everything they had at us, so this bad boy just happened to hit the dirt too." He paused. "And it **\*\*does\*\*** require a pilot."

Samuel was smiling when he saw something that changed his mood once again. A pair of Phantoms were hovering directly above Blaine's commandeered vehicle.

"Hey Blaine," Samuel said, "you know you've got

company?"

"Huh?"

"Above you," Zeke added, "you've got hostiles, a damned lot of them."

"Well, Hell!" Blaine said. "You know, that would normally be great, but I can't pilot this thing and fight them. Even I'm not that talented! You guys mind sending me a little backup? Or, at least, send me someone to drive this thing while I kick some ass?"

\* \* \*

Zeke focused on Jason's mark on his HUD. "Drop me off." He said.

"You got it. Sam and I will go tend to the last Scarabs. Sound good, Samuel?"

"Yeah," Samuel said, then to Zeke, "just don't go nuking that station. I know what happens when you or Blaine get too much firepower to work with."

Zeke smiled. "Whatever you say, Goliath," he said.

The Hornet closed the remaining ground quickly, and Ezekiel watched as the two Phantoms opened their side-hatches and spilled Covenant soldiers onto the top of the enormous Scarab. Many of them vanished immediately into the lower-decks.

"Hurry up," Zeke said with a smile. "I'm gonna miss the fight."

Finally, the Hornet got close enough for Ezekiel. He knew Jason wanted to get directly above the Scarab, but he couldn't wait: he leapt out with as much horizontal distance as he could and landed solidly on the edge of the top of the huge Covenant craft with a heavy 'thud.'

And, at that, four Brute Minors turned to face him.

"Hope this isn't a private party," Ezekiel said as the Brutes surrounded him. He smiled and crossed his arms, bored. They were barely armed. One in front of him, standing almost on the edge of the Scarab, had a Brute Shot, but the others only had Spikers.

The one with the alien grenade launcher lashed out twice with the bayonet at the end of the weapon and missed twice as Ezekiel drew back and dodged easily.

\_This is why you don't give Minors heavy weapons,\_ he thought. The Brute swung again, and Zeke bent his knee so that the mounted blade came up and blocked the bayonet. His arms were still crossed at his chest.

"Tell you what," he said as the Brute struggled to push the blade forward and the others watched, inexperienced and unaware of exactly what to do. "I'll make you a deal: I'll take the four of you in eight seconds, or I'll jump right off this Scarab. Ready? Set? Go."

He spun his body left a full circle and kicked the Brute hard in the stomach with his left leg as he came around, sending the alien tumbling over the ledge. At that, the one behind him took a step forward, but he thrust his right foot back and felt the bones in the creature's knee shatter.

The Minor to his right swung with its Spiker, but was met with the blade mounted to Zeke's right knee as he ducked and it was thrust into its chest. Without pausing, he flipped his right foot up behind him and caught the hunched-over Brute in the chin, leaving it howling to the sky. He spun on his left foot and, with his right leg, kicked the Brute in the back and let it stagger over the same ledge the first had.

As the second Brute fell from the Scarab, the one that had started on Ezekiel's left took a brutal swing with its own Spiker, but the Spartan merely jumped straight up and flipped backwards, over the alien's head. He landed solidly on the ground behind it. The Minor turned around in time for Zeke's foot to hit its chest and push it, like its brethren, over the ledge.

"Time?" he asked the AI in his head as he looked down at the fallen Brute that was kneeling on the ground, bleeding out. The shot with the blade had hit home: he'd hit a major artery somewhere. To add insult to injury, Zeke's arms were still crossed at his chest; they'd never moved.

"Six-point-six seconds," Demon answered.

"Damn," Zeke said, kicking the fallen alien once in the ribs, "I should've told them I'd do it in seven."

\* \* \*

"It's mine now, freak! I took this bad boy fair-and-square, you miserable excuse for a primate!" Blaine yelled as he crushed another Brute under the heavy head of his Gravity Hammer. Twenty of the aliens had first come down the ramp, into the Scarab, but several of them had stayed near it, allowing the rest of their kind to charge him in waves.

\_If they were smart,\_ he thought, \_and if they really wanted their toy back, they'd charge en masse and get it over with.\_

"Wretched human!" another of the aliens yelled as it rounded the corner from the ramp, carrying a pair of Brute Maulers.

"Shit," Blaine growled. He wanted no part of getting within shooting-range of the Covenant's mini-shotguns.

Before he could think of anything, however, another Brute, from the opposite side of the ramp charged him as well, also carrying a pair of Maulers.

"Alright," he said, taking a quick glance at the monitor to make sure that nothing was going to hit the Scarab from the outside and also to check on the other, new-model machine outside the Research Station. "I've had just about enough!" He put the hammer on his back and reached for his other weapon: a Pistol.

The Brutes stopped suddenly, appearing almost amused by the puny weapon he'd pulled from his thigh. But Blaine knew better: it wasn't the only thing he was carrying.

"Come and get me now!" He gripped the edges of the piece of equipment on his back and flung it out in front of him like a Frisbee. The octagonal explosive flew out in front of him and time seemed to slow as Blaine took careful aim with the Pistol.

BANG!

He fired one round as the flying Trip Mine passed by the two Brutes. The device, now activated, detonated in the middle of the room, sending their wounded bodies careening into the walls, shield-less and bleeding.

Blaine aimed and fired two more shots, adding another pair of alien deaths to his running tally. He smiled, putting the Pistol back on his thigh. "What a waste."

Suddenly, one of the Brutes hidden behind the ramp let out a terrible roar and Blaine saw crimson blood splash against the walls. A second later, Ezekiel rounded the corner, running backwards toward him and winging grenades back the way he'd come.

"Hi," he said, stopping next to Blaine.

"Hey," Blaine answered casually as four angry Brutes came around the corners from the ramp. Zeke turned to look at him.

"You mind if I drive for a while?" He motioned to the control panel.

"Not at all," Blaine said, grinning, "but let me borrow that." He pointed to the sword on the other Spartan's thigh.

Ezekiel seemed to consider it for a few moments, then picked the hilt from his armor and tossed it casually through the air. Blaine caught it and activated it instantly, waving it around like a Jedi in one of the old Star Wars movies he'd seen as a kid.

"Hell yeah," Blaine said, "\*\*\*Now\*\* we're in business!" He charged into the four Brutes with the blade raised, uncaring as to whatever they might be armed with. He ran the blade through the first one to come near him and, at the same time, gripped another Brute Minor by the neck and crushed its windpipe with his bare hand. The other two drew back slightly, but Blaine was in no mood to wait: he cornered them and punched one in the face, crushing its features and breaking its skull. The other he pinned up to the wall and finished with the Energy Sword.

A second later, he heard additional footsteps atop the Scarab, and waved once to Ezekiel as he charged up the ramp.

\* \* \*

"I'll help Stephanie," Samuel said, focusing on Jason, who was still piloting the Hornet. "You go and see if Blaine and Zeke can use any help. Or, better yet, check on Landon and make sure he's still

killing Banshees off. If they don't need help, then by all means, get back here!"

"Alright," Jason answered unenthusiastically. Samuel knew that he wanted to get out and help, but the giant Spartan had faith that Jason would be able to do much more for the others from the air than he could do for him.

\_Alright,\_ Samuel thought as he ran for the Research Station. He was still a few hundred yards from the entrance that Stephanie had been assigned to, and already he could see dozens of Covenant troops raining ammunition on her entrance.

"Stephanie," he said into the link, focusing on where her beacon was on his HUD. "Can you hear me?"

"Yeah Sam," she said, "I can hear you." She sighed loudly. "Where the \*\*Hell\*\* have you guys been?"

"We've been busy," he said, "but I'm on my way up now."

"You better hurry," she said. Samuel thought she sounded dead-tired, like she was ready to collapse. "We're losing a lot of ground up here, and there are a whole freakin' load of them!"

"I'm coming!" Samuel said. "Just hold on."

He covered the remaining ground with renewed resolve, but still wondered if he'd be able to make it in time. Now he was only about forty yards from the nearest Covenant soldiers, and he could suddenly make out more than fifty of them, all in a tight group laying fire down like there was no tomorrow.

Samuel scowled. \_And for Stephanie, there might not be.\_ He ran faster, bringing his Battle Rifle to bear and picking off everything in his reticule. He aimed for the Brutes first and took a few down, causing the Grunts to scatter. Unfortunately, there seemed to always be more of the Jiralhanae, and they were keeping the Grunts under control just a little too well.

"Forget this!" Samuel snapped, putting the weapon back and bringing his two Shotguns to his chest. A voice suddenly echoed in his head.

"Hold a minute, Sam!" Zeke said loudly. Samuel could've killed him for the interruption.

"I can't, Zeke! Stephanie's on her own up there! I gotta go!"

"Just wait," he said. "You know what they say: when you're angry, count to ten!"

"Zeke don't make me-"

"Just count for me!"

Samuel scowled bitterly.

"One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-"

BOOM!

A giant stream of green plasma cut across the landscape in front of him, swallowing up dozens of the Covenant soldiers and leaving the area destroyed and utterly barren of life. The beam arced slightly, hitting more aliens, then slowly ceased. Samuel glanced up to the Scarab. Sure enough, its "eye" was dripping blue-green liquid.

"Ha-ha!" Ezekiel laughed coldly through the link. "That's what you bastards get! Wrong planet, wrong continent, and the wrong **\*\*damn\*\*** city!" he yelled.

Samuel sighed, bringing the Shotguns back up. "Thanks, Zeke."

"No problem," he said, "happy to help."

The giant Spartan didn't wait for any more interruptions. Samuel still counted at least eight Brutes and over a dozen Grunts outside, and that meant he had work to do. In a few moments, he'd covered the remaining ground and was charging into the group of Covenant soldiers, who were now trying desperately to unload their weapons on Stephanie's group and still keep one eye on the Scarab in case of another assault.

"Hey!" Samuel yelled as he came up behind the first of the Brutes. This one was wielding a Carbine and turned to face him just in time for the Spartan's twin Shotguns to tear its head clean off its shoulders.

Instantly, the giant, brown-armored Spartan had the attention of every Covenant soldier in the area. They turned on him, the closer ones trying to bludgeon him to the death, the others shooting randomly into the crowd.

Samuel had just blasted a Brute Minor in the chest when he heard an alien scream from behind him. "Enjoy my brightâ€|blueâ€|balls!" The Grunt yelled, arming a pair of Plasma Grenades and raising its hands high in the air as it charged him.

\_Freaks,\_ he thought, putting the Shotgun from his left hand between his right arm and his thigh and the Battle Rifle from his back. The Spartan didn't even use the scope: he just pointed and let the three-round-burst do the rest. One of the shots connected with the Grunt's skull and it fell face-first into the dirtâ€|

â€|right next to a group of three red-armored Unggoy and a pair of Brute Majors.

BOOM!

The two grenades detonated, setting off a chain reaction that set off the explosions of nearly a dozen explosives. Suddenly, the number of remaining aliens was down to eight. Samuel turned to a pair of Grunts behind him.

"Please!" one yelled. "I have wife and kid!"

Samuel decided to humor them. "Uh-huh," he said. He pointed to the other, "what about him?"



"You can kill him." The Grunt said without a moment's hesitation. Immediately, the other Grunt had drawn a Plasma Grenade.

"How could you?" It asked in a terribly injured tone.

Samuel backed away as they began to argue. He waited until he was several meters off and they were arguing, then fired the Battle Rifle once, targeting the Grunt holding the grenade.

BOOM!

A bullet hit the explosive, detonating it and allowing the cloud of blue plasma to swallow them both. Samuel turned around to face the last of the Covenant soldiers: four Grunts and a pair of Brute Majors.

"Don't shoot!" One of the Grunts yelled as it drew its own Plasma Pistol and began firing. Still, it yelled, "don't shoot!"

The Spartan shook his head. He was tired. He was anxious. This day needed to end, and this Grunt wasn't making it go any faster. He raised the Battle Rifle as bits of plasma dissipated against his shields.

"No!" The Grunt yelled. "Not me!"

As Samuel aimed the rifle, the Brutes began to unload their Spikers in his direction and another Grunt primed and threw a Plasma Grenade.

\_Today just can't be good,\_ he thought, \_stuff just cannot go right.\_

The giant soldier jumped to his right to dodge the flying blue grenade, and primed one of his own. He threw the red-orange-colored explosive and watched happily as it hit one of the Grunts, exploding and sending burning liquid spreading all over the alien. As expected, the Unggoy panicked, running up next to its brethren and catching them on fire as well.

In seconds, the two Brutes were surrounded by four flaming idiots, all pleading and screaming for their commanders to save them.

Samuel pointed the Battle Rifle one last time, careful to aim for the methane tank on the back of one of the Grunts. He sighted carefully and pulled the trigger.

BOOM!

The flames ignited the inner gasses of the tank and caused a series of explosions: first from the methane, and then from the grenades the Grunt had been carrying—and then from the grenades and methane tanks of the surrounding Grunts.

When the smoke cleared, the Unggoy were all dead, and the Brutes were lying, battered and bruised, in a circle of flames and alien parts.

Samuel sighed, putting the Battle Rifle on his back and running up to the entrance where Stephanie's marker was located.

\* \* \*

"We're on our way, Samuel." Landon said into the link as he pushed the Hornet to go full-throttle toward the Research Station. He'd already picked up Victoria, and Jason was behind him, in a Hornet of his own.

"Alright," the brown-armored Spartan answered immediately. "Just be careful and get here as quickly as you can. Stephanie's not hurt and I'm just fine, so no rush. I imagine Zeke and Blaine will be here pretty soon too."

"Got it," Landon said. He focused on Victoria in the jump seat and Jason, in the Hornet behind him. "You guys get all that?"

Two green lights blinked in the corner of his HUD.

Landon did a double-check, turning the Hornet slightly to the left and right in search of any more Scarabs that might've somehow escaped detection or perhaps were dropped in the past few minutes. There were none. The only remaining Scarab was the huge, grey, old-model behemoth, and that one was under the control of Blaine and Ezekiel.

\_Finally, \_he thought, \_finally we might get to take a damn break.\_ Normally, he wouldn't have even considered resting, wouldn't have wanted to, but the Spartans hadn't slept since before they got the Phantom to come to Los Angeles. How long ago had it been? Landon pondered the thought. Had it really only been less than a day, less than twenty-four hours? He couldn't believe it. It felt like **\*\*ages\*\*** ago.

Finally, the Hornet overtook the skeletons of the two destroyed Scarabs that had been ready to attack the Research Station before Blaine halted the assault with one of his own. Samuel had destroyed the machine in the back without much trouble, from what Landon had heard, and now they both sat there, empty, crippled shells of the terrible contraptions that had given the Marines so much trouble.

Now hovering above the scorched battlefield where Ezekiel had given the Scarab's main gun a test-run, Landon lowered the Hornet and flew in closer to the facility, stopping less than ten meters from the big, titanium doorway that Samuel and Stephanie's markers were hovering at in his HUD.

He lowered the Hornet slowly until it finally brushed the ground, then shut it off. Victoria was already out and dashing for the door. Jason landed behind him, opened the glass window to the cockpit, and hopped out.

"Maybe we'll actually get a five-minute break this time," Jason said with a laugh. Landon grinned and shook his head.

"Somehow," he said, "I doubt it."

\* \* \*

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Well, this is it. Next chapter, I'll be revealing

what's actually inside the Weapons Research Station. Anyone who would like to take a guess as to what's in there is more than welcome to. I'm curious if anyone might've figured it out. Now, to note, I didn't give many hints out, so I don't really expect it, but if anyone guesses...well, I'll be very impressed. Thanks again to everyone reading, and I hope you'll take just a minute and review for me! Later!\*\*

\*\*P.S. - As a final note, it just occurred to me a talk I had with a friend of mine about Ezekiel's part, where he destroys one of the Scarabs by sniping the power core. I don't know if anyone is wondering about that but, if by chance you are, I can assure you that it does work. I did it in the Halo 3 game on Legendary on the level "The Storm" before I tried it here. It took four shots there, so that's what I used here. :) That's all! lol.\*\*

### 33. Chapter 32: Loyalties

\*\*Author's Notes: Here we go! Chapter 32! I actually got a bit of a scare this week, because, for SOME reason, my Java program on the computer randomly decided to un-install itself without my knowledge. That means when I try to access my story here on FanFiction, I can't SEE IT. So, today, I finally located the problem and reinstalled it and all is well. But enough of that... reviews!\*\*

\*\*AosUnderSol: lol, yep, you were most-definitely right! Trust me, the Covenant's good beating isn't over yet. And, in regards to the Sangheili: I'm sorry they weren't mentioned in the last chapter much. The truth is that I got so wrapped up in the Scarabs that I ended up with almost 9,000 words dedicated to them, and I didn't want to extend the chapter anymore than it was. It's a sorry excuse, but they're in this one, and they'll have their time in the next couple as well, promise.\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: Hey! Glad you liked that last chapter! I really liked it when I was writing it. Might not be my best, but I really do love the Scarabs. As for your guess for the facility...well, we will see.\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Thanks for your review! I liked the comments you made on the Spartans' personalities. I think you'll find a little bit more of that showing through in this one here. As for what's in the facility...I think you'll be surprised. I think most people will. :)\*\*

\*\*Lecter42: Your comments also struck me as very attentive to the story line, and they made this next chapter kind of hard to write with a clear conscience, lol. You'll see what I mean if you read through. I'll put a little note to you at the end, so that I don't spoil what's coming. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: lol, the Grunts arguing...that just kind of came to me. If you want to, you're more than welcome to use it in your own story, no problem whatsoever. Happy to help! lol. \*\*

\*\*Samson00: lol! I still can't believe you commented on Chapter 1, haha! No, but seriously, I figured you would like a couple of those parts. Thanks a lot for your review, and for the comment you made about my story within your own. I'm hoping you'll have another

chapter up soon, eh? Eh? Maybe? Please? haha. Later, man!\*\*

**Benaia Dre:** So, you liked the Scarabs too? I'm glad they were as big a hit as I thought they would be. Although, I'm missing reviews from a couple of people...cries Still, thanks very much for the compliments, and I hope you like the slower pace of this one too!\*\*

**FireWolfFred:** Hey, I thought you'd like the action! Your guess on what's inside the Research Station...well, I don't know. Read on, if you would, and find out! ;) As for your question, where my inspiration comes from...well, a lot of places. The three most prominent areas are: (1) Halo matches with friends, (2) Halo 3 Campaign on Legendary with a few skulls with or without friends, and (3) a lot of action movies and an exceptionally random imagination. I know, it sounds weird, but really, I don't even know where I get half my stuff, lol.\*\*

**So,** with that, on to the chapter! We're gonna slow things down for this one, get a little bit of a breather, but I think you'll enjoy it. After this, it's a full-on race to and from the warzone!\*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 32:<strong>

â€" **Loyalties** â€"

**1400 Hours - January 2, 2553**

**Inside the Research Station - Los Angeles, California**

"Now why did you go and do that?" Landon asked, seemingly heartbroken. From the doorway into the Research Station, he could see the giant, old-model Scarab suffering from small explosions and buckling on its enormous legs. Seconds before, Ezekiel had informed him and the group that the A.I., Demon, had been allowed to have a little fun in the craft's database and main computer-networks.

"I wasn't going to," Ezekiel answered. "Blaine and I were just going to leave it for the Marines to take care of, but we got a direct order from the higher-ups to nuke the damn thing." He sighed. "It doesn't really concern us all that much, so I wasn't about to argue with 'em."

At that, Landon watched as the Scarab finally collapsed completely, its legs giving way and the huge "eye" crashing to the ground a few hundred yards away from the Spartans. Had he not been a Spartan, tears would've likely found their way out of his eyes and onto his face.

"That's not even right," he said. "I could've piloted that. I could've smashed the Covenant with their own damned Scarab."

Blaine walked up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder in false-sympathy. "Well," he said, "not now, you won't."

Landon shook his head as he walked away from the door and Victoria's A.I. shut it through a keypad on the wall. He couldn't even fathom why HIGHCOM would order the destruction of something they already had control of. It didn't make any sense.

"Guys," Samuel said, interrupting his seething, "we've got company."

Landon looked up immediately, focusing first on the closed titanium door to the outside of the Research Station, and then on the door on the opposite side of the room that led further into the structure. Beyond that door, which was cracked open, he heard footsteps. Ezekiel scoffed.

"Relax," he said. "The steps are light, soft. They're either Marines or they're Grunts. Either way, I'm not exactly shaking."

A few moments later, the door swung open and, sure enough, a group of a half-dozen Marines stepped cautiously into the room. Instantly, one of them stepped forward from the group and addressed the Spartans.

"Corporal Neal Highlands," he said quickly. "And you must be Zulu Company."

"That's right, sir." Samuel said, stepping forward and offering a salute, which the rest of the team followed instinctively. The man waved his hand, and seven hands rested once again. "Have you heard from the Sangheili, by chance?"

Highlands nodded. "Yeah," he said. "We got word from..." he paused, apparently trying to remember the name.

"Ahrmonro?" the Spartan leader offered.

"Yes!" He said. "That's it. The Field Master, that's who it was. He said that he and a partner were already a few floors below us," the man glanced down, pointing to the ground beneath his feet. "Apparently they're trying to clear the place of the Brutes, but they're having a tough time of it, just the two of them."

Landon nodded as he listened, then suddenly shook his head, wondering if perhaps he'd zoned. "He said that there were only two of them?"

The Corporal looked shocked at the question. "Yes," he said patiently. "Just two of them, that's what split-lip told me."

"There were three of them," Blaine spoke up, "that's why he asks. There were three of the Elites, last we saw them." Highlands nodded, understanding.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't be of a whole lot of help to you, but I can tell you that there's someone at HIGHCOM who's pretty eager to get a hold of you." He paused, rubbing his hand along his chin. "Apparently you've got new orders."

Landon rolled his eyes behind his visor. He hadn't even recovered from the first set they were given, much less the airborne battle with the Banshees.

Samuel turned to the group of Spartans, looking down at them slightly from his huge frame. "I'll talk to them," he said. "You've got a few minutes of rest, if you're lucky. Use it. When I know something, so will you."

There were mumbles of acknowledgement and a few of the Spartans leaned up against the walls of the room or just flat-out sat down on the floor. However, there were also a few of them that never seemed to rest. These Spartans just messed around with their Energy Swords or, in one case, Gravity Hammer.

\* \* \*

>"This is <strong>Spartan 025</strong> of Zulu Company," Samuel said into his helmet, trying to locate the frequency his superiors were on. "I repeat: this is **Spartan 025**. Can anyone hear me?"

It took a few moments, but finally someone answered. "This is General Elijah Coleman." The voice said. "Am I speaking to the Spartan in charge?"

Samuel cocked his head for a moment. He'd already stated that he was a Spartanâ€|after that, most just asked if he was the **person** in charge. "Yes," he said, "I'm the head of the team."

The General let out a quick scoff that made Samuel uneasy and slightly offended, but he bottled the displeasure and let the man continue. "Those of us here at the HIGHCOM branch have some new orders for you and your Spartans." It bothered Samuel the way the last word fell from the General's mouth dripping with disdain, but he didn't have any way of addressing it.

"Okay," Samuel said as politely as he could manage. "I'm listening, sir."

"As you should've been informed," Coleman said, "the Anti-Aircraft Guns are no longer your concern, nor have they been for a few hours, now." He paused before adding, almost reluctantly, "you did well to neutralize the Scarabs before they reached the Research Station but, unfortunately, the Covenant found their way in anyway."

Samuel scowled. Of course they did.

"Your new orders are to work your way down the structure until you reach the ground-floor. There, at the heart of the facility, you'll receive further instructions."

"Yes sir," Samuel said, "I'll ge-"

"I'm not finished." The General snapped. "You need to divide your so-called "team" and send as many as you deem necessary to plant a pair of Fury-class nuclear warheads. Again, further information will be given to you later. All you need to know is that the warheads will be on a timer and that your "team" had better find its way out of the facility before they go off."

Samuel was puzzled. "Sir," he said as courteously as he could manage. "With all due respect, I can't split my team up to plant a pair of nuclear bombs set to timers we're not even being informed of. Forgive

me, but, is there a reason that I can't be told the time of the warheads' detonation, or even what it is that I'm sending my team to the bottom of the base to obtain?"

"Yes!" Coleman yelled back into the intercom. "Damn right there's a reason! That's classified information, only to be released on a need-to-know basis. You'll send your soldiers down there, and they'll beat the Covenant to the bottom, or I'll deal with your decommission myself!"

Samuel was stunned. For one reason or another, this man had an absolute hatred for both Samuel and his entire team. He sighed, remembering General Malone. That man, he'd thought, was the worst. Perhaps he was mistaken.

"Sir," Samuel said calmly, "I have a tremendous respect for humanity and the cause that Zulu Company and every other soldier has willfully joined. However, I cannot, in good conscience, send half my team to the bottom of this station while the others plant nuclear weapons that could very easily kill them before they even know what's going on."

He paused, remembering a speech he'd heard from Corporal Charles before Zulu Company had ever undergone any augmentations. The Corporal had been quoting a man who claimed to know the Master Chief, Spartan 117, personally. The Corporal had been quoting Chief Petty Officer Franklin Mendez.

"I was once instructed in the difference between a life spent and a life wasted, General." Samuel said. "While I will gladly spend my own life or even the lives of my teammates, I will not waste their lives because of an unreasonable decision to keep us in the dark," he paused, and then added, with an inescapable tinge of malice, "sir."

The General was quiet for several seconds. Suddenly, he began to laugh coldly to himself. It was a dark, bitter laugh that, to Samuel sounded vaguely forced. "Well, I suppose decommission perhaps wouldn't be the best idea for you after all." He said.

Samuel felt confidence in the man's voice. And a trap—he felt a trap. Whatever it was, he didn't like it.

"I have a question for you, Spartan," he said, again letting the last word drip from his tongue like acid. "You say that you and your team are committed to humanity's cause. I believe that. Really, I do. Here's the question though: if your team is so committed, so loyal, where do their loyalties actually lie? What if I were to give them the same orders I just gave you? How many of them, do you think, would choose your orders over mine?"

Samuel opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a laugh even colder and more cynical than the one he'd heard only seconds before. It was at that second, as he looked around at the other Spartans, who were all staring right at him, that he realized that they had been listening. For how long, he didn't know. But they had.

The laugh grew darker, colder. Finally, it ceased and Ezekiel answered the General. "How many of us would choose Goliath's orders?" His attitude was lighthearted, almost jocular. But the Spartan didn't

wait for an answer. All at once, his tone grew as black as his armor, and he growled, "Every last damn one of us."

At that, multiple green lights of acknowledgement flickered in the corner of Samuel's vision and the voices of multiple Spartans could be heard over the communications-link. None of them were malicious or even remotely disrespectful in their comments, but every single one made it clear that they would follow Samuel before they followed Coleman.

When the noise finally died down, Samuel made a motion with his hand, slicing the air in front of his throat and signaling for them to leave the channel. He smiled to himself. "So, General Coleman," he said without so much as an ounce of sarcasm or arrogance, "I'll ask again. Please, would you tell me what I need to know?"

\* \* \*

>"Pay attention, Spartans." The General's voice echoed loudly in Stephanie's ears. After agreeing to fill them in on what was inside the Research Station, he made the order that all Spartans should tune in on his frequency so that the words wouldn't have to be said more times than necessary, even between teammates. "I'm only saying this once." He said. <p>"We're listening, General." Samuel said. His voice was stern, but not threatening. "Everyone's on this frequency."<p>

"Alright," the man grumbled. "First of all, as I shouldn't have to tell you but I will anyway: everything you're about to hear is completely top-secret. It sounds like something out of a movie, but I can assure you I'm anything but joking. If any of you breathe a word of this to anyone I don't pre-approve, there will be lethal consequences. Is that understood?"

Each of them said "yes sir" and Stephanie immediately remembered being back at boot-camp with the other twenty-four Spartans. She didn't have but a second, though, as the General started speaking again.

"Okay. Now, first, I'll inform you that a group of Marines are inbound on your entrance to the facility. They will be carrying the two Fury-class warheads that you're to plant within the facility."

Stephanie pondered the idea. She wasn't Blaine, so heavy explosive ordinances weren't really her specialty, but she had learned enough as a Spartan to know that a single Fury Tactical Warhead packed a lot of punch. To set off two of them, both inside the same structure, seemed like overkill.

"These two warheads will detonate fifteen minutes after they are set. They're on a self-starting timer and have enough power to blow the Research Station â€" and all the Covenant here â€" straight to Hell." He paused for a second, then added, "and by the way, "Research Station" isn't the right terminology."

Ezekiel scoffed at one end of the link, but said nothing.

"So," Landon said, "what is it?"



The General let out a short, bitter laugh. "It's a manufacturing plant and a storage facility, Spartan."

"For what?" Blaine asked, his patience obviously waning.

"Bombs," the General growled, "the biggest bombs in history."

Stephanie's eyes went wide. She heard Ezekiel's voice, riddled with disbelief. "You're not serious."

"There's a pair of NOVA-class bombs below your feet, Spartans." The General said, not a hint of emotion appearing in his voice. "This facility was created to manufacture the bombs and then ship them out on our own military vessels."

"But it never got that far," Samuel said, apparently comprehending. Stephanie just shook her head. It was madness.

"If either of those two bombs are found and triggered by the Covenant anywhere near the planet," the General said, "there won't be anything left to save. They'll blow the damned planet straight out of the solar system." He laughed. "You thought the Halos were bad; these bombs might not destroy every piece of sentient life in the universe, but they'll sure as Hell do a good job with us."

"So what do we do?" Blaine asked.

"HIGHCOM wants you to beat the Covenant to the bombs. They're at the very bottom of this structure, and the only way there is to fight your whole way down. The Covenant don't know where they are, so they're moving slowly, cutting open every door they find in search of the "weapon" they think is located here."

At this, Stephanie was puzzled. She'd heard nothing about a weapon. "Sir," she said, "why do they believe there's a weapon here, unless they're aware it's a bomb?"

The General scoffed from his end of the link. "Apparently some idiotic Grunt in one of their communications-booths intercepted a message from the lead scientist at the facility. He was giving HIGHCOM the details on their latest digital tests on the efficiency of one of the bombs in space."

"Okayâ€|"

"Well, evidently the stupid little methane-breathing pain-in-the-ass got the wrong idea and told his superiors that here, in California, we had another spacecraft with the power to "destroy a planet in a matter of seconds." He paused, then said with more than a little pride, "which we are working on, by the way. But it's not here."

Stephanie nodded. "So that's why the Covenant have been so dead-set on getting inside." She said. "They think we've got some spaceship here and they want it for themselves."

"Yeah," Coleman said. "At first we were worried that they'd just glass the whole place, but they found out the hard way that their largest crafts couldn't get past the MAC Guns. We intercepted

messages that included some Unggoy telling a Brute Chieftain about our "horrible new battleship." The next of them included orders for a ground-based assault. A day later, here we are."

"That's ridiculous." Ezekiel snapped. "Who the Hell thought it was a good idea to manufacture "Planet-Killers" on Earth, our home planet?"

"These are complicated times, Spartan." Coleman said, his last word still filled with immeasurable contempt. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

Zeke started to say something, but Landon cut him off. "Hold on," he said, "what are we actually supposed to do once we get to the bottom and find the bombs?"

"There are several elevators," the General said. "They're at the bottom, in the same room as the finished NOVA-bombs. The idea was that, when the weapons were finished, they would be loaded into these elevators and dropped down a series of shafts that, when all is said and done, take them more than a mile below the Earth's surface. Down there, they're safe from attack and can be called up as needed." He paused, then said, "or, as a last resort, detonated remotely."

"Okay," Landon said, "so why are we being assigned to go down there?"

Coleman scoffed. "Look around you, Spartan." He said. "Is anything in the room running apart from the keypads at the doors?"

At this, nearly every Spartan turned to look, including Stephanie. Sure enough, there was a desk with a pair of computers at one end of the room, but neither of them was turned on. The only things running were the keypads at the doors and a pair of security cameras.

"The scientists working here managed to delete all the information on the NOVA-class warheads from their computers before the Brutes made it inside. Unfortunately, they did eventually make it, and when they did, they found a way to short the main power. Security systems are the only things that work, and they're doing all they can to slow the Brutes' progress. The fact is, those bombs are too big for the scientists to move without the machinery that - normally - is running down there."

"So let me get this straight," Blaine said. "You want us to race to the bottom, get the bombs, put them in elevators, drop them a mile into the Earth, seal the shafts, and then detonate a pair of nuclear weapons in order to keep the aliens from finding them?"

"Yes." Coleman said. "And, if you can, you should probably add "getting away from the facility" to your list. Otherwise, you're all dead fifteen minutes after you plant the bombs."

"That part was implied." Blaine snapped.

"Either way," the General said, "it's no skin off my back. So, any questions?"

"Just one," Jason said. "Why didn't we order an air-strike? We

could've taken the Anti-Aircraft Guns out, dropped a pair of Fury-class warheads outside the structure, and then moved in and maybe even salvaged the NOVA-bombs for another occasion. Not only that, but we'd have wiped out a ton of those bastards."

Suddenly, both Blaine and Ezekiel scoffed. Samuel shook his head but said nothing.

"What?" Jason asked defensively. "What did I miss?"

"The Covenant changed the rules." Ezekiel said. "Hell, they changed the **\*\*game\*\***."

"What are you talking about?"

Now it was Blaine's turn. "If you'd have spent more time observing your surroundings while you were in that Hornet, you'd know."

Stephanie found that she was just as puzzled as Jason was, and she didn't like the way that everyone's tempers were showing through.

"Alright," Samuel said, "that's enough." He turned to Jason. "The Covenant left the city of Los Angeles almost completely intact." He said. When Jason gave no response, he added, "do you remember the woman that Stephanie found before we were attacked by the Horde?"

Suddenly, it all clicked in Stephanie's mind. She'd seen another woman after getting off of a Scarab, but had thought nothing of it. Now, she started recollecting seeing people more often than she should have. They were everywhere. Hiding, but they were there. Earlier, she was focused on her mission, and her mind just blocked them out. They had no bearing on her performance, so they were treated as if they weren't even there.

"The Covenant came here for whatever they think is inside this facility." Samuel said. "They knew that, if they eliminated everyone in the city, we would gladly drop a nuke on them and call it a day. But, with so many people left alive, no one in HIGHCOM could justify dropping a nuclear weapon on the city."

"I don't know why," Ezekiel chimed in. "I'd have dropped one by now."

"No one asked you." Landon said.

"That makes two of us." Blaine answered.

"Enough!" Samuel snapped, temporarily focusing only on the Spartans. "Everyone needs to get a grip, right now. Everyone's tired. Everyone's stressed. And everyone's in pain. But guess what: we're Spartans. Act like it."

At that, not another word was said until General Coleman spoke again.

"The Marines should be arriving in the next few minutes." He said. "Are there any other questions before this conversation ends?"

"The bombs we're planting," Stephanie said, nervous that she'd miss the obvious as Jason had done but reassured by Samuel's condemnation of their previous behavior. "What if they reach the city? They'll take thousands of lives in seconds."

"Normally yes," Blaine interrupted, "but these walls are thick." He walked over and punched one of the titanium plates. Even with his cybernetic, Spartan-level strength, the wall didn't give even a millimeter. "These walls are Titanium-A, the same material the UNSC uses on its battleships and other spacecrafts. The Fury Tactical Nuke has a range of about 1.2 kilometers. If these walls are as strong as they're advertised to be, some of the explosion will escape, but not very damn much."

Stephanie was dumbfounded. She'd heard the same lectures Blaine had while they were younger, before their augmentations and actual combat, but she was still dumbfounded at the specifics he was able to give. "Are you sure?"

"Blaine knows his bombs." Samuel said.

Blaine nodded. "That I do."

\* \* \*

>"My blade's battery is empty." U'svere said, motioning to his Energy Sword's dull, deactivated hilt. He looked at Ahrmonro. "What about you?" <p>The gold-armored Field Master raised his Energy Sword. It was also deactivated, the battery completely drained. "Do you have anything else?"<p>

"A Plasma Rifle with a battery at twenty-six percent," U'svere answered. Ahrmonro nodded.

The two Sangheili were only a few floors from the bottom of the Research Facility, but they were completely incapable of getting through the next room, adjacent to their own. At the far end of it was a staircase to the level below. Between that staircase and the Elites, however, stood more than fifty Covenant soldiers, a dozen of them Hunters.

Things had been going smoothly for quite a while, in all honesty. The building, while enormous and countless stories high, was easy to traverse through for the most part. The two Elites had taken an elevator first, all the way down to the fifth floor. Past that, however, only staircases existed to grant them access to the lower levels.

"We cannot defeat them with these." Ahrmonro said, looking down at his own Plasma Rifle. "The beasts have us vastly outnumbered."

U'svere nodded. "We could return to the upper levels and salvage some of the Brutes' weapons, then return."

Ahrmonro shook his head bitterly, clicking his mandibles quietly as he did so. "I hate the Brutes' weapons." He said. "And, even if we did, there are still far too many of them."

U'svere sighed. "We must wait on the Spartans?"

The Field Master nodded, hissing bitterly through his breath. "Close," he said, "but we are not waiting. Come. We will go and clear the way for the humans. The quicker they reach the bottom, the sooner we spill the Brutes' blood across this floor."

\* \* \*

>Victoria watched as a group of Marines stepped nervously through the doorway and into the "Research Station." One of them had a big, bulky-looking bag on his back. <p>"The bombs are in here." He said, handing Samuel the bag. The giant Spartan took it, nodded appreciatively, and then handed the sack to Blaine.<p>

"You're on bomb-duty." He said. "One goes on the floor below us. The other hits the floor right at ground-level."

"Got it," Blaine said. "But what are we going to do about the NOVA-bombs at the bottom?"

Samuel seemed to ponder the thought for a second before answering. "We'll move down the structure as a team. When you go to plant the first bomb, you, Stephanie, and Landon will take care of anything on that floor. The rest of us will go on ahead, clearing out whatever we find. That means that you should be able to catch up fairly quickly."

"Okay."

Samuel continued. "Once you catch us, we'll move as a team again until we hit ground-level or major resistance. In the case of major resistance, Zeke and Victoria will go on, as they're the fastest ones here. The rest of us will stay back and work to plant the last bomb. Then we clear the way out of this place."

"Sounds like a plan."

At that, the brown-armored Spartan turned to Victoria. "If you have to go ahead, you're going to need to hotfoot-it all the way out to make it in time." He paused. "Will you be able to make it?"

Victoria rolled her eyes. "I'll make it just fine." She said. "Just make sure he can keep up." She tilted her head toward Ezekiel.

"Careful," he said. "I'll be the one covering your ass down there."

Victoria sighed. "I know." She said. "That's why I'm worried."

"Alright everyone," Stephanie said, getting their attention. "Don't forget: the Covenant have a massive head-start on us."

Ezekiel laughed as he bent his knees and did a few quick leg-stretches. "Yes, now let's see them try and keep it!"

\* \* \*

><strong>Author's Notes: So, that's it! I'm really, really curious to see what anyone has to say about what I decided on in the Research Station. I know, I know, it's random and it's the polar opposite of what most people would think of, but I want everyone to understand, I considered a LOT of things for what to put in there...and I made the decision based on another decision I've come to:<strong>

**\*\*I have a sequel to write when this story is over.\*\***

**\*\*With that being said, I won't mention the storyline, who will still be in it, anything like that...just know that, in this story, everything I do leaves me more options for the future. So, with that being said, one last word to Lecter42 for his review:\*\***

**\*\*Like I said, your comments about them "respecting" the chain of command and their superiors made my idea for this chapter really hard to execute. Just know that I wanted Samuel to argue and to put his foot down, even if it would result in his decommission, but I didn't want him or any of them to be deliberately disrespectful. So, if you would, tell me what you thought, 'cause I really am curious to find out how it was received.\*\***

**\*\*Thanks again everyone, and I hope you all enjoy it!\*\***

#### 34. Chapter 33: Saboteurs

**\*\*Author's Notes: FINALLY!! Oh my gosh...first of all, I apologize to everyone for the (now-typical...grrrrr) delay. However, this time, I cannot take the full responsibility for it. Granted, I was either 4 or 5 days late getting this one done, but, as I'm sure you noticed, this chapter is multiple WEEKS late. FanFiction, for one reason or another, adamantly refused to even let me UPLOAD this chapter, much less post it. Finally, it loaded this morning and I made the Author's Notes and such. Now, finally, it's up. I'm really sorry for the delay...and, to try and compensate, I will likely have the next one up within a few days (since I had so much time to work ahead...grrrrrr).\*\***

**\*\*Anyways, real quick here, Reviews!\*\***

**\*\*Taylor114: lol, I would like to think I'm halfway-decent at the whole "writing-thing," though I will never claim it aloud...Anyways, I'm afraid you might be somewhat disappointed with this one, 'cause it's really more of a lead-up to the climax for this segment, which is the next chapter. It's in that one that the major stuff is going to go on. But, for fun, I put in some stuff I've wanted to use for a while and I hope all the fans of Zulu Company (and Blaine, in particular) will get a kick out of it. Also, like most other characters, the Sangheili will have a much larger role next chapter, for the end.\*\***

**\*\*killerman83ca: Thanks, as always, for your review! You'll get a glimpse of what's gonna happen here, but I'm keeping the good stuff secret for a few more days.\*\***

**\*\*AosUnderSol: Sounds dangerous, huh? Yeah, that's exactly what I was goin' for, lol. Trust me, the danger is comin' up. Also, glad I got the reactions I wanted with the Spartans. That too is exactly what I was going for, lol.\*\***

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Thanks! I intend on getting plenty of use out of the "Weapon Research Station" and the NOVA's before it's all said and done. Also, Magnus will come in soon. That's all I can tell you for fear of spoiling it for everyone. But I promise, soon. And, as I answered Taylor114, there is plenty of action in this one, but it's also a lead-up...so, you get the idea. Finally, my X-Box Live name is Vee619 (soon to be changed...), but you should know, I don't have a Broadband connection at my home. I have God-forsaken dial-up. I got to play at the house of a friend of mine (thanks Gormanuyai) and get some achievements last weekend over Spring Break, but that's pretty much the only time I get to play. However, if you like, there it is. :)\*\*

**\*\*Lord of the Trees:** Yep! A NOVA bomb! I'm gonna have fun with that, lol. This chapter's got a little more action for you, so I hope you enjoy it. The next one will be the climax of this segment, and will have a lot of the stuff I've been saving, so I've got a little more for you to look forward to, in the way of fighting and troublesome situations.\*\*

**\*\*Nameless Desturction:** Thank you for the compliment on my writing! I do appreciate it! Also, in regards to your question...I don't know. I can tell you, unfortunately, not in this particular story. HOWEVER, a friend and I did some brainstorming (Thanks to Samson00), and I may very well end up making this a trilogy of sorts. The first one will be this book (obviously, lol), the second will take place on Earth, the third...well, I'll leave that one a secret for now, but, if I do get there, rest assured that it will include one of the Halo rings.\*\*

**\*\*Lord of Purple:** Thanks much for the compliment and for your review! As for what you asked about, the Sangheili being aware of the bombs...not exactly. In fact, I'm not gonna lie, they don't have the slightest idea. Don't worry though, I wouldn't forget about them!\*\*

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian:** lol, thanks for your review! I'm glad that I got the image of the Spartans across that I wanted to. Battle-weary, sore, and worn-out, even the greatest of soldiers has his/her limits. And the whole deal with them following Samuel before they follow some ONI spook or random higher-up sitting in the air-conditioned confines of a base somewhere...yeah, that was exactly how I wanted it! lol.\*\*

**\*\*PandamanX:** Well, about that whole "posting chapters regularly" thing, lol...I tried. Honest I did. But, anyways, thanks for the review, and you were kind enough to include both chapters, so all is well! lol. I'm glad you liked the old Scarab's inclusion. I wanted really bad to have one boarded and controlled, but the new ones are supposed to be Lekgolo-piloted (so I hear...), so I just decided to circumvent reality a little, lol.\*\*

**\*\*And,** in regards to the chain of command and the Spartans getting royally screwed from the the HIGHCOM base...yeah, that reminds me a lot of real-life! But, it all ended okay...for now. As I'm sure you've figured out, things never go exactly as planned in the world of Halo.\*\*

**\*\*Lecter42:** I take my reviews seriously! lol. Honestly, if I didn't,

I couldn't expect anyone to leave me any. I wouldn't deserve any, lol. But, I do appreciate yours and the others I receive. Anyway, I was really at a loss for a way to have that "argument" without them all coming across as being indifferent to their superiors or otherwise disrespectful...but I thought the quote was the best bet I could place. I'm glad you (and, it seems, all my other reviewers) agreed.\*\*

\*\*Oh, and in regards to what you said about, maybe, having a commander somewhere who's not quite so obvious about his or her hatred for the Spartans...well, I've got (most likely) three books to do it in. And, I was gonna do it here...but I thought that, if I did...well, the odds of them finding out about the bombs at all would be slim to none. Trust me though, I'm thinking of having something along those lines in the not-so-distant future.\*\*

\*\*Hehehe, and thanks for that tidbit from Tom Clancy too. I enjoyed that.\*\*

\*\*vernox: Hey! It means a lot that, even if you have to copy and paste it all, you still take the time to read my little story here! I appreciate that! Why do you have to copy it all first? I mean, honestly...that doesn't sound like fun at all. But, anyway, I hope you'll stick around to review some of my other chapters that are coming up. I'm really getting close to the whole segment that made me want to write this story in the first place, so expect it to be good! Thanks again for your review!\*\*

\*\*Now, with that out of the way, and before FanFiction decides to tell me "no!" once again, Chapter 33!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 33:<strong>

â€" \*\*Saboteurs â€" \*\*

\*\*1500 Hours - January 2, 2553\*\*

\*\*Inside the Research Station - Los Angeles, California\*\*

"Why are the lights still on? I thought only major security protocols were up and running." Stephanie said as the group of Spartans charged through an open room and darted for the door on the other side. This was their third â€" and last â€" room on the top floor, and they'd yet to see a single Covenant soldier.

"No idea," Blaine answered quickly as Victoria opened the door at the end of the room and let the rest of the Spartans run through. He stepped out of the room and onto a huge staircase much like the ones he'd seen as a child in schools. They weren't spiral staircases, but switchback-style ones: they wound around a roughly square room in small increments of about a dozen steps with each individual section being directly below the section two spots above it.

"Don't ask questions," Jason chimed in cheerfully. "Just count our blessings, chalk it up to luck, or whatever it is you do. Regardless, be thankful we've got light to see the Covenant."

Ezekiel scoffed. "If we ever find any," he said.



Blaine ignored him and led the way down the staircase, stopping at the first door he saw. The stairs continued down for what seemed like eternity, but the first bomb needed to be planted first. He let the others pass before preparing to open the door.

"We'll clear the way as far as we can get." Samuel said. "Follow the stairs as low as they go, and then look for the next set. That's where we'll be."

Blaine nodded and opened the door, leading the way for Stephanie and Landon to follow.

The room he entered was nearly identical to the ones on the top floor, albeit slightly larger. It was a simple rectangle with a ceiling that was full six feet above his head and the walls were decorated with maps of continents, seismic readouts, charts detailing planetary orbit around the sun, and weather patterns, among other things. Ruined desks, chairs, computers, and equipment littered the floor.

The Brutes had already been through here.

Blaine scowled. \_Of course they have,\_ he thought, \_they're clearing the whole place out. Why should they miss the second floor?\_

Landon reached the door first, bringing a Shotgun to bear and gripping the handle. He turned to Blaine and Stephanie.

"Let's go." Blaine said bluntly. He wasn't in the mood for waiting, and for once their situation was in agreement with him. Landon nodded and swung the door open, taking a few cautious steps inside.

"Well, this sucks." He said, glancing around. Blaine did the same, but saw nothing but chaos and disarray identical to the room before.

No Brutes. No Covenant. No threat.

"What the **\*\*Hell\*\***!" Landon said loudly. He was disappointed and waving the Shotgun around. "Why are we even **\*\*armed\*\***?"

Blaine rolled his eyes. He was tired. They all were. Unfortunately, he and Ezekiel shared a similar vice: patience—or, rather, the lack thereof. "Enough." He snapped. "The less Covenant we see in here, the better. I'm ready to get the Hell outta here."

With that, he led the way to the next door, threw it open, and stopped cold.

"Of course," he whispered bitterly.

There, in the next room, were seven Brute Chieftains, five in red armor, carrying Gravity Hammers, and two in shining gold armor, hefting large Fuel Rod Cannons. The beasts were without bodyguards or escorts and were talking amongst themselves.

"Woah," Landon said, whistling quietly.

"You asked for it." Blaine growled. "And now you got it."

"There're only a few of them." Stephanie said. "I've got plenty of ammo in the Fuel Rod. No problem."

"Alright," Blaine answered, nodding and hoisting the Rocket Launcher up to his shoulder. He turned to Landon. "Stephanie and I will go in and soften them up. We'll aim for the two with the guns first. After that, it should be a cakewalk."

"Works for me," the other male Spartan answered. He instinctively put his Shotgun away and brought up a Battle Rifle. "I'd prefer to keep my distance from the Hammer Bros., if you don't mind."

"Whatever works," Blaine said, double-checking the launcher. When he was satisfied, he turned to Stephanie. "On my count," he said.

She nodded.

"Oneâ€|twoâ€|three!" As Landon gripped the handle of the door and swung it open, hard, Blaine led Stephanie into the room and fired the launcher twice, sending a pair of speeding explosives toward the nearest Chieftain.

A half-a-second later, Stephanie had followed suit, unloading a full load of five shots from her Fuel Rod Cannon toward the Brute at the opposite end of the group. The seven charges hit only fractions of a second apart and terrible shadows overtook the walls and ceiling in the flashing green light.

Before the smoke had even cleared, four Brute Chieftains came crashing through the room, hammers raised high above their heads. Stephanie took a few steps back, but Blaine only quickened his pace as he ejected the launch assembly and inserted another.

The first of the aliens closed in on him as he finished loading another pair of rockets and he raised the launcher in time to see the Brute leap into the air, clutching the hammer with both hands held high above its head. Blaine smiled.

He fired the launcher and watched the rocket collide with the alien's stomach, sending it reeling back onto the floor. As the creature tried to sit up, however, Blaine held his weapon securely on his shoulder with his right hand and backhanded the alien in the face as hard as he could with his left. The Covenant soldier howled as it rolled across the floor and finally came to rest in a heap against one of the titanium walls.

"Die!" A deep, alien voice cried out behind him. It sounded insanely close.

Blaine turned around to see another of the hammer-wielding beasts less than two meters away, running at a dead sprint right for him. He grinned and fired the launcher again.

Suddenly, there was a feeling of dÃ©jÃ vu as the familiar surge of overpressure washed across his helmet and suit. His shields dropped to nothing in the explosion, but Blaine couldn't have cared less. He dropped the launcher to the ground and reached into the still-expanding smoke from the rocket just as the Brute reared back to strike with the hammer.

Before the beast could swing, Blaine had a hold of the Gravity Hammer somewhere between the handle and the head and was holding it securely with his right hand. As the smoke cleared, he watched with a grin on his face as the now-helmless Brute struggled and groaned, trying to wrench the hammer free from the Spartan's hand.

"Not today," Blaine said, throwing a punch with his left hand that caved in half the Brute's face. Instantly, the Covenant soldier let go of its prized weapon and fell over, clutching its face and howling.

Blaine didn't give it another chance. He took two steps forward and crushed the beast's skull with his boot, attaching the alien's weapon securely to his back and looking around for any remaining enemies.

There were none.

Stephanie and Landon were each perched over a fallen alien, weapons drawn, but otherwise calm and collected. Blaine smiled, pulling one of the Fury-class explosives from the bag he'd been carrying.

And suddenly, a thought rang out in his head, drowning out everything else.

\_It could've gone off.\_ He thought, looking at the small, fragile bomb in his hands. It was no larger than an over-inflated football. Suddenly, images of the rocket he'd fired and hit a Brute at point-blank range bounced around inside his head.

"I'm sure it's got a failsafe." He whispered to himself, although not entirely sure. It was a scary thought that he just couldn't quite shake.

"Come on, Blaine." Stephanie said. "Let's get going."

"Right," he said, walking over to a desk that was tipped over in the corner of the room. He took the explosive and placed it delicately behind the desk, out of sight.

None of them waited. Landon led the way out and then further down the switchback-style staircase. Finally, after nearly ten floors, it leveled out into the floor and Blaine saw that the door was already propped open.

With the body of a Brute Major.

"Well," Stephanie said, "I'd say they've been here."

"Good call," Landon said, opening the door wide and stepping inside.

Once he stepped inside, it became obvious to Blaine that, when Samuel said "major resistance," he meant **major** resistance. On the floor were the bodies of nearly thirty Covenant soldiers, the vast majority of them high-ranking Brutes. Several of them were bleeding from dozens of small wounds, which meant that Ezekiel and Victoria had stuck around.

Quickly, Blaine moved ahead and led his team through the remains of the slaughter and to the next door. Without hesitating, he threw it open and ran inside.

And stopped dead.

"Shit."

\* \* \*

><p>"So," Ezekiel said, "does this count as major resistance?"<p>

Jason could only stare, stunned, at the group of Covenant soldiers that stood between the Spartans and the door to the next staircase.

In terms of numbers, there weren't really that many of them. Only two-dozen Grunts and half that many high-ranking Brutes and Jackals stood between them and the door. However, four of those Grunts were manning rapid-firing Plasma Turrets.

And there was something else the Spartans had never seen before: Hunters.

There were two of them, the gigantic, twelve-foot tall, bipedal alien tanks. Even crouched in a fighting stance, each member of the pair stood at about nine feet tall. They were made up of an uncountable number of Lekgolo worms, all of them together creating a "hive" creature, clad in a nearly-impenetrable armor of unknown origin and composition and equipped with a mounted Fuel Rod Cannon.

"Alright," Landon said, turning to the two genetically-altered Spartans. "Go ahead and jump 'em. We'll clear the way and meet you at the bottom."

At this, Ezekiel let out a bitter, forced laugh. "Hell no," he snapped. "The last two times I tried to jump an alien armed with a Fuel Rod Cannon, I wound up picking my ass up off the ground."

"Well," Blaine said, "I'm out of rockets and I don't--"

Out of nowhere, a searing red laser cut through the one side of a Brute and hit the Hunter behind it, torching a blistering hole straight through the creature's "impenetrable" armor and sending the rest of the Covenant soldiers into a panic. Jason risked a glance behind him in time to see Samuel with the Spartan Laser.

A few of the Spartans groaned a bit at seeing such a potentially-challenging enemy dispatched so easily, but the giant Spartan's answer was short and quick. "I'm ready to go home." He said.

Suddenly, the sound of scattering Covenant stopped and Jason heard an awful roar from the far side of the room. The remaining Hunter charged at them from the doorway, crushing or throwing aside any alien foolish enough to get in its way.

"Nice," Zeke said, "you pissed it off."

Jason watched Samuel raise the laser and pull the triggerâ€|only to hear a horrible "CLICK," signifying the gun's empty battery.

"Great," Blaine said sarcastically. "That's just perfect!"

Jason brought his Brute Shot to bear and watched in awe as the Hunter stomped toward them, denting the floor with every step. The soldiers behind it seemed to take a moment to register what was happening, but, within a few moments, were all armed and firing blindly toward the crowd of Spartans.

"It's not the Hunter that worries me!" Landon yelled as he put his shields up, temporarily safe from the plasma and projectiles that were flying toward him. "It's those damned turrets!"

"Is that all?" Victoria's voice sounded through the communications system. A second later, brandishing an Energy Sword, she took off like a bolt of lightning, running around the Hunter and toward the Covenant soldiers at the far end of the room. The giant alien tank stopped to watch her, but only for a second. A moment later, it let out another roar and charged the group again as Victoria raised Hell with the small number of aliens behind it.

"What now?" Landon yelled.

"Stephanie!" Blaine said, "when you said that you had "plenty" of ammo in the Fuel Rod Cannonâ€|exactly, how much is that?"

The female Spartan seemed to take a moment to register his question, then answered, "I've got four shots left."

"That's it?" He answered bitterly. "That means you started with nine, which, for the record, is **\*\*not\*\*** plenty!"

"Use what you have!" Samuel interrupted, bringing a Shotgun to bear as the Hunter paused its charge. "Hit it with everything you've got!"

Jason nodded, aiming his Brute Shot even as the other Spartans stood with their own weapons ready. He waited for someone to fire the first shotâ€|

CRACK!

A shot from Zeke's Sniper Rifle ricocheted off the armor on the Hunter's left arm. At that, the whole room exploded into chaos.

Jason fired all six loaded grenades from his Brute shot, watching them arc through the air. He couldn't hear the shots, however; not over the four green flashes coming from Stephanie's Fuel Rod Cannon. In addition, the Sniper Rifle's barrel flashed three more times as Ezekiel fired again and again.

Samuel and Landon had closed in on the Hunter and were letting loose with a pair of Shotguns, but the weapons appeared to be having littleâ€| if anyâ€| effect on the alien soldier. Blaine, armed only with his Gravity Hammer, stood and watched, waiting on an

opportunity.

"Go!" Samuel yelled suddenly, looking directly at Ezekiel. "Now's your chance; take Victoria and get the bombs! We're out of time!"

The black-armored Spartan gave a quick nod and ran around the Hunter, taking off for the door. He nearly yanked Victoria off her feet as he ran by, snatching her arm. She had just barely managed to finish the last of the Brutes before he did so.

Suddenly, the Hunter spun in a huge circle, swinging its giant armor-plated limb like a club. It caught both Samuel and Landon, tossing them both into the walls of the room as if they were rag-dolls.

"Will somebody **\*\*please\*\*** kill that thing?" Landon shouted as he worked to stand.

Jason had reloaded the Brute Shot and took aim again, firing all six shots, but again, they were useless.

"Kill the Demons!" An alien voice echoed from the doorway that Ezekiel and Victoria had just left through. Jason peeked around the Hunter to see a group of three Brutes crowding in the open doorway.

As if in response, the Hunter charged forward again, swinging its great arm down and barely missing Stephanie as she dove out of the way. Even before she stood up, it had redirected its sightsâ€|right at Blaine.

Jason was still reloading the Brute Shot when the bipedal tank charged the white-armored, cybernetic Spartan. He could only watch as the Hunter, its arm low to the ground, closed in and raised the armor-plated club, ready to catch Blaine at his center of gravity and fling him straight up into the ceiling. Somehow, Blaine didn't falter, he put his arms down in a desperate attempt to block the shot. The Hunter finally got to him and threw its arm up, hitting Blaine's outstretched hands and-

It stopped.

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine groaned and strained against the tremendous force the Hunter was pushing him with. He could feel the mechanical parts in his arms already starting to give, even after only a few seconds. This particular alien creature was made up of countless smaller organisms, called the Lekgolo, and, unlike the Brutes, was more than a match for his biomechanical muscle.<p>

\_It's too much,\_ he thought to himself as he saw a number appear in the right-hand-corner of his HUD. It was a percentage, and it now read 87. That was the power-output of his biomechanical parts. Right now, he was at 87-percent of his maximum potential, and that number was quickly rising. The only time before that he'd ever surpassed 85-percent was when he and Stephanie had ripped the Plasma Turret from the bottom of a Covenant Phantom. Even then, 90-percent was his stopping-point.

Now, even as the thoughts passed through his head, he felt his cybernetic pieces straining and forcing themselves to stay put. The number in the corner of his HUD kept rising. By now, it had topped 96.

\_I can't keep this up.\_ He thought, the terrible strain on his arms now finally starting to get to him. As his power-output topped 98, his HUD began to blink bright red, and three words that had appeared earlier, but he'd ignored, flashed brighter and brighter: **\*\*System Failure: Imminent\*\***.

The Hunter let out a low growl and Blaine watched as the Fuel Rod Cannon mounted to its opposite shoulder swiveled slowly to face him. A second later, it began to glow green.

\_Alright,\_ he thought, *\_it's now or never.\_* He made a mental choice to reroute all excess energy " shields included " to his left and right arms. At the same time, his MJOLNIR suit injected a dose of adrenaline to allow his physical body to keep up with the newfound strength.

Before the Hunter could fire its weapon, he moved his still-outstretched hands to the edges of the metal plate covering its right arm. A half-a-second later, Blaine gripped the edges and pulled to his left, starting to spin as he did so.

The tremendous boost he'd been provided, while not enough to lift the Hunter, was more than enough to overpower it and allow Blaine to spin a full circle, dragging the Covenant soldier on the ground by its armored limb as he did so. By the time he'd almost made a full circle, he'd picked up speed and was actually able to hold the creature a foot off the ground.

Blaine yelled as his energy-output topped 200-percent and he made a last, quick spin and let go of the Hunter's armor as he came back around. The huge alien slid along the titanium floor, armor first, directly into the three Brutes that had gathered in the doorway. Two of the Covenant soldiers, too stunned to move, were pinned and crushed against a wall while the other barely escaped with its life. Blaine put his hands on his knees, panting as the excess energy began to return to his shields.

"Damn!" Landon yelled. "What the Hell was that?" He began to laugh. "Dude, you just threw it! You just tossed a **\*\*Hunter\*\***!"

Blaine nodded slowly, still panting. The entire ordeal had done a number on his shields and on his arms, which still burnt like they were on fire.

"Not bad," Samuel said, putting his arm on Blaine's shoulder. "Now I'd say we need to get-"

"Oh, Hell no!"

As Jason yelled the words, Blaine glanced up and nearly fell over backwards. There, in the doorway, were three additional pairs of Hunters, all being led by the single surviving Brute Captain.

"So," Landon said nervously as he turned to Blaine, "I don't suppose

to you could do that again?"

\* \* \*

><p>"How much further?" Victoria asked as jumped down their fourth set of stairs and kicked open the next door.<p>

Ezekiel scowled. "Too damn far," he said. His best guess was that they were on the sixth floor. They'd passed a dozen rooms filled with Covenant without so much as a strike or a scratch, but that wasn't going to mean much if they slowed down. Even if they didn't, Ezekiel wondered what was going to happen when all the Covenant found them at the bottom.

"We've got to be on the sixth or seventh floor." Victoria said, leading the way into another lifeless room that had been torn apart by the Covenant soldiers that had beaten them there. Zeke wondered just how far the aliens had made it.

"Sixth," he answered. They came to another door and charged through it, meeting eight Grunts and six Brutes on the other side, waiting for them. "Damn it," he cursed. The aliens were standing right in front of the door.

"Please," Victoria said, "there's a dozen of them. What are you, scared?"

Zeke scoffed, annoyed. "Scared? No. Tired? Yeah. Sore? Uh-huh. Irritated? Damn right." He took the Sniper Rifle from his back, moving back and forth to dodge the oncoming plasma the Covenant soldiers had just started firing their way.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

Three shots echoed in the room and a trio of Brutes hit the ground in a heap. The Grunts around them immediately scattered and Victoria began to mop them up with her Battle Rifle.

CRACK!

The fourth shot in the magazine cut through the heads of a pair of Grunts and the leg of a Brute standing behind them. The two smaller aliens collapsed as the Brute's Power-Armor fell into pieces.

A second later, another three-bullet-burst from the Battle Rifle put the Covenant soldier to rest on the cold titanium floor.

In less than a full second, Ezekiel reloaded the Sniper Rifle and fired another two rounds, leaving the remaining Brutes on the floor bleeding from identical holes in their foreheads.

No sooner had they hit the ground than another Brute â€" a Chieftain wielding a Fuel Rod Cannon â€" appeared in the doorway behind them. It let out a roar and put the weapon on its shoulder just as Victoria skidded to a stop.

"Demo-" The word never fully left the alien's mouth, for the end a blue-white blade of energy suddenly emerged from its chest and it fell face-first onto the floor, dead.



Behind the Covenant soldier, a familiar SpecOps Elite stood, holding his gleaming Energy Sword. "Good to see you alive, Demons." U'svere said.

Ezekiel smiled. "Thanks for the assist." He motioned to the Chieftain. U'svere made a surprisingly-human shrug.

"It was my pleasure, Demon."

"Where are the others?" Another deep, alien voice echoed just behind the SpecOps Commander as Ahrmonro stepped into the doorway.

"They're still upstairs." Victoria said.

"You split up?"

She nodded. "We have two missions here. The first is to get to the bottom floor and tend to the two NOVA-class bombs located there. The second," she paused, "the second is to plant another two nuclear warheads within this facility and then try to get out with our lives."

"The floor three stories below this one is housing nearly sixty Covenant soldiers." Ahrmonro said. "We've cleared the building down to that point, except for a few floors that we skipped over in favor of the elevator shafts."

At this point, U'svere spoke up. "There are at least a dozen Hunters on that floor. It's going to be almost impossible to break through, even with the four of us working together."

"Oh no," Zeke said, interrupting. "This isn't a job for all four of us. While I appreciate the offer, Victoria and I will get to the bombs much faster on our own. There's still major resistance upstairs, and I'm sure the others could use the help. We just nee-"

"That's ridiculous!" Victoria snapped, cutting him off. "Why shouldn't we take their help?"

Zeke scowled. "Think about it." He said. "The others will be planting the bombs right above our heads. The only reason you and I are down here on our own is because we're fast enough to get out in that kind of a time-span. We can avoid any battles we don't have time for." He turned to the Elites. "Can you?"

The two Sangheili seemed to ponder the question for a while before Ahrmonro finally answered. "The Demon is right," he said to the SpecOps Elite. "If there are Covenant soldiers stopping us, we would not be able to avoid them as the humans could." He turned back to Ezekiel. "We will help the rest of your team deal with the Brutes. Hopefully, with them coming from the top and us from the bottom, the filthy primates will be overwhelmed and dispatched without a problem."

"Sounds good," Victoria said, conceding the argument from before.

"Alright," Zeke said. "Let's go then. We've still got a lot of ground to cover."

And, with that, they separated once more.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Well, they've officially invaded the station. I know, not the greatest of chapters, or probably not even worth the wait, but the next one I've got huge plans for and it's almost done (gotta work out some kinks and check for grammar, etc). I'll have it up by the end of the weekend, provided FanFiction approves, lol. Thanks all, and don't be afraid to tell me what you think! Later!<strong>

\* \* \*

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### 35. Chapter 34: Plans In Motion

\*\*Author's Notes: Well, here's the next one, as I said, by the end of the weekend. Also, to note, I decided to split this one and the next one into two 4,000-word (give or take) chapters because of some suspense I'm planning in the next one (which, for the record, is finished and will be released after a few days or several reviews...whichever comes first).\*\*

\*\*Yes, I know, I lied again, lol, and this isn't quite the end, but I promise, it's worth it. This chapter and the next one I'm hoping will be an excellent to the Los Angeles segment of the story. And, after this...well, we get into the real stuff, and I'm granting a wish that's been asked of me several times, lol. But, for now, Reviews!\*\*

\*\*And...it's a short list this week. That saddens me, but I understand. Hopefully they'll pick up again?\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Well, you said keep 'em coming, so here's the next one for you, lol. Also, I ran a search on the story you gave me and checked under your profile, but couldn't find it. Could you maybe give me a link or, if it's under the other author's name, could you give me that so I can find it? Thanks a lot!\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: Glad you liked the Hunter-throw (it would appear that most people did, yay). And, of course, leave it to the others to say, "hey...just curious..." and ask him to try it again after about two seconds of rest, lol. As for the Spartan Laser and its battery...well, you've seen Zulu Company's luck thus far, and that shouldn't surprise you that much, lol. Hope you like this next update (if you like Hunters, I think you will). Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: I'm happy you and the other reviewers liked that last chapter (even if it was late...)! I've been waiting FOREVER to have Blaine throw a Hunter...you can't even imagine. I started this story with a few key-scenes in mind for several characters...and that was one of them. Thirty-three chapters into it, I finally got to do it! lol. Oh yeah, and the Elites...well...I'm a big Sangheili fan, so expect them to perform at the tip-top of their game. Oh, and if you thought last chapter showed their stripes...well, watch Ahrmonro. He

might just take on the Arbiter for "kick-butt" status, lol.\*\*

\*\*Oh, and, to note what you said about them meeting the other Spartans, specifically the Master Chief...I don't know. Right now, I can almost guarantee that they will never come face-to-face with good ol' MC, but I don't know about other Spartans yet. The reason I don't include the Master Chief directly is, truly, because I don't know how I would try to write his persona. It's not mine, and I'd be terrified of botching it up. So yeah...\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: lol, throwing Hunters is good for popularity, if I do say so myself! But seriously, I had fun with it. And what's that? You thought three pairs were bad? Well, strap yourself in, my friend. Things are about to get rough. ;) As for the XBox name...no problem. I just wish I could play more, lol.\*\*

\*\*Now, to the next chapter!\*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 34:<strong>

â€" \*\*Plans In Motion â€"\*\*

\*\*1700 Hours - January 2, 2553\*\*

\*\*Inside the Research Station - Los Angeles, California\*\*

"Come on!" Landon said bitterly. The Spartans had just come down another flight of stairs and emerged on the fourteenth floor, opening a door and looking into a room with a dozen Brutes, six of which were commanding small contingents of Grunts and Jackals. Thankfully, Zulu Company's soldiers were just barely peeking in the door, and the aliens hadn't noticed them yet. "How many of them are in this place? Do they even \*\*have\*\* an army outside anymore?"

"It doesn't matter what's outside." Samuel said sternly. "What matters is what's in front of us. Now come on, let's get this over with." At that, he gripped both of the Shotguns mounted to the armor on his back and brought them to bear.

The other Spartans nodded once each and brought their respective weapons to their chests. Unfortunately, ammunition was running in short supply and a couple of them had been forced to pick up the dropped weapons of fallen Covenant soldiers. Blaine, for example, had his trademark Gravity Hammer, but was also carrying a Covenant Carbine, a weapon not at all typical of him. Landon, in addition to his Shotgun, had a Needler mounted to his armor. Finally, Stephanie had a pair of Brute Maulers supplementing her Battle Rifle, as opposed to her usual weapon: a Fuel Rod Cannon.

"Alright," the brown-armored leader said, "on my mark." He held one hand up in a fist and slowly counted with his fingers. The second he signaled "three," the Spartans took the small alien force by storm, mowing them down without a second's apprehension.

Samuel, Landon and Stephanie charged into the group bearing the heaviest weapons they had, while Blaine and Jason took aim with their

longer-ranged weapons. Blaine, for being one typically suited to up-close-and-personal fighting with a Gravity Hammer, was a surprisingly-accurate shot with the Carbine, picking off a dozen Grunts and five Jackals in only eighteen shots.

Jason, on the other hand, had a Covenant Beam Rifle and was taking aim at any of the Brutes that the three close-range Spartans either missed or had difficulty with.

Samuel, after being in Los Angeles for what now seemed like years, went into autopilot, raising the Shotguns and blasting anything and everything that stood between him and the door to the next room. A pair of Brute Captains attempted to block him, each carrying a Brute Shot.

Each found itself with multiple 8-gauge shells lodged in its chest, throat, and face. The aliens' Power-Armor never had a chance.

In under fifteen seconds, the entire group of over thirty Covenant soldiers had been effectively obliterated and reduced to nothing but heaping piles of alien corpses. Samuel glanced around to check for injuries or oddities. As expected, the attack had been flawless. Even tired and under both stress and a time-constraint, Zulu Company was still performing at a caliber the Covenant couldn't match in their dreams.

"Not bad," the giant Spartan said, reloading the Shotguns and poking the next door open slightly. "Reload, get ammo if you need it, change weapons, or whatever else you need to do. Twenty seconds, and we move out again. Go!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Die, you wretched beasts!" U'svere growled as he spun in a half-circle and cut open the stomachs of a trio of Brute Majors. The Covenant soldiers roared in rage, but were answered only with more cuts, the next ones aimed carefully for each Brute's jugular and consequently much more deadly than the last.<p>

At that moment, the white-armored SpecOps Elite felt a wave of vertigo as something hit the ground behind him and he was flung mercilessly into the nearby wall, face-first. Without a second's pause for the pain, he quickly picked himself up and faced the new threat with spread mandibles, snarling lowly.

"Where is your Field Master now?" The Brute Chieftain asked mockingly, motioning to the wall behind it. U'svere risked a glance to see Ahrmonro on the ground as well, and also working to stand. The red-armored Brute swung its great hammer around madly, daring the Special Operations Commander to step forward.

U'svere growled again as he did a quick sweep of the room to check for any additional Brutes. A single hammer-wielding Chieftain, he could handle. A Chieftain and a handful of beasts wielding explosivesâ€|that was another matter, though the sense of honor and warrior-nature of the Sangheili would never allow him to admit it.

Finally accepting that there were no more Brutes to sneak up on him, U'svere stood, clutching his Energy Sword in his right hand. He

activated the blade, allowing the shining plasma to cast wicked shadows on the titanium walls and ceiling. The Chieftain smiled wickedly in its ornate headdress.

"You worthless Elites never did know when to give up!" The alien yelled, waving the hammer around again. Before U'svere could give any sort of retort, the beast charged, first running, and then leaping into the air and holding the hammer high above its head.

The Sangheili made an expression with his mandibles that was the alien equivalent of a smirk and ran forward instantly, holding the sword at chest level. Before the Brute could come down from its great leap, he ran clean underneath it, slicing the beast at its legs and lower-abdomen.

Even before the Covenant soldier hit the ground, the damage was evident: it roared in the air and bent its legs into acute angles in response to the horrifying pain that was coming from its bleeding veins. When it did touch down, the beast failed to stand, instead collapsing on its now-useless appendages and flailing on the ground in agony as it attempted to stand.

"You see, Brute?" U'svere growled as he came up to the hammer-wielding alien, no longer even remotely concerned with any threat it might possess. "I need no assistance to kill you, or any of your pathetic race." He paused, snarling. "No Sangheili would."

At this, the Brute roared again, louder than ever, and tried to swing the hammer with one arm. The Elite, alert and ready, jumped the side-swing easily and came down with a single foot on the beast's throat, instantly silencing its rage.

"You have wasted enough of our time." U'svere said, re-activating the sword once more and, with a final slice of the white-hot blade, putting the Brute to rest for good.

At that moment, the gold-armored Field Master walked up beside him. "Not bad, brother," he said. "Now, let us go. The humans will need our help."

\* \* \*

><p>"So that's the group the Elites were talking about earlier," Victoria said. She had just barely opened the door and was now staring intently through the small crack.<p>

On the other side stood â€" on her count â€" fifty-eight Covenant soldiers, varying from Grunts to Jackals to Brutes to Huntersâ€"eight Hunters, to be exact. There were eight of the giant bipedal alien tanks, fifteen Brutes of varying ranks, ten Jackals, and twenty-five Grunts, also of seemingly-random ranks.

"No," Ezekiel answered sarcastically, "what was your first clue?" He scoffed, shaking his head. "Well, they were right about one thing."

"Which was?"

"It's gonna be a colossal pain in the ass to make it any further."

Victoria, still annoyed with him, only nodded. "We can't fight them all." She said bitterly. The comment wouldn't have been so bad, except that she wanted to. If the fate of the world were not on her shoulders, if the NOVA Bombs didn't have to be located so quicklyâ€|she would be fighting them. "Gael," she whispered, focusing only on the AI.

"Yes?" Gael's always-pleasant tone answered quietly in her head.

"Is there ano-

"If you're asking Gael for an alternative route," Ezekiel said loudly, interrupting her, "give it up. Demon's already run a scan. The only other way into that room is to go back up to the eighth floor, get to an elevator shaft, and jump down. That would take us to a hallway that would bring us to the bomb-room's entrance opposite the one behind our friends next door." He motioned quickly to the doorway in front of them.

"Never mind, Gael," Victoria whispered, genuinely irritated with Ezekiel's arrogant, indignant, know-it-all attitude. Samuel seemed to be the only one who could keep the black-armored fighter in checkâ€|and Victoria had a sneaking suspicion that that had to do with rank and nothing else.

"I hate to say this," Zeke scowled, "but perhaps keeping the Elites around would've been the best move." He paused, then added coldly, "if nothing else, the Brutes would surely have an easier time hitting them than you or I." He shrugged. "Too bad."

Victoria had hit her breaking point. She was sore, exhausted, and bitter. In the midst of all this, hearing Ezekiel talk about using the Sangheili as bait was almost enough to cause her to explode. "They're on our side now!" She snapped. "They have just as much right to life as you do," she paused, "maybe more."

The other Spartan let out a short, cold laugh. "I was just kidding." He said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Now come on. I've got an idea."

\* \* \*

><p>"That's not even right!" Jason said as the five Spartans were backed up against a wall. In front of them stood seven giant Hunters, each one's shoulder-mounted cannon glowing neon-green. Only a minute before, Blaine had successfully pounded one of the creatures into nothingness with the Gravity Hammer. Of course, the Spartans were well aware that this would enrage the creature's "bond-brother."<p>

What they were not aware ofâ€|was that six more Hunters would emerge from doors on their left and right sides to surround them.

"Okay Sam," Landon said, holding his Shotgun close to his chest. "What the Hell do we now?"

Samuel let out a forced laugh. "Kill them all."

"Thanks," Blaine said sarcastically, "that helps. Great idea. Kill

them allâ€|why didn't I think of that?"

About that time, seven green beams of energy flew toward the Spartans from all sides, and they scattered, each one diving for cover in a room full of nothing but turned-over desks and empty space.

"Alright," Landon yelled. "So, I've got an idea!"

Jason paused as the Hunters charged their cannons again, eager to hear some kind of plan to get them out of their current mess. He waited for a full six seconds, but Landon didn't voice his idea.

"What the Hell are you waiting for?" Blaine yelled.

"Sorry," Landon answered coolly, "I wanted a little suspense first."

"Landon!"

"Well," he said, "what if we each pick a target and work on them alone? That way none of us gets ganged-up-on."

Jason rolled his eyes. Before he could give a response, Blaine had already started raving.

"I knew you had a few screws loose up there, Landon," he said, "but I always thought you could at least do basic math! How many of us are there?"

"Five."

"How many of them are there?"

"Seven."

"See a problem somewhere? I sure as-"

There was an alien roar from the far side of the room, and Blaine stopped. Every being in the room turned to find the source.

"There is no problem, Demon." The gold-armored Sangheili said, leading U'svere into the room. "Your "math" is perfect."

"Spartans!" Samuel said, "choose a target and go to work!"

Jason didn't wait for the brown-clad giant to tell them twice. He brought his Beam Rifle to his chest and searched the room for a Hunter with its back to him. Sure enough, on the right-hand side, one of the great behemoths was too busy facing the Sangheili to pay him any mind. As the humans and aliens scattered, Jason resolved to make the Hunter regret taking its eyes off him.

\_Readyâ€|aimâ€|fire!\_ He fired the Beam Rifle twice in quick succession, overheating the Covenant weapon, but causing the Hunter to roar in pain and rage as a pair of small blue beams of concentrated energy cut through the worms making up its back. The Covenant giant howled and charged him, its metal-plated arm low to the ground.

"Oh Hell," Jason managed before the Hunter swung its arm at him, hard. The Spartan managed "barely" to get his dual arm-shields up in time to take the brunt of the attack, but was still flung ruthlessly into the wall.

Jason landed in a heap and glanced up just in time to see the Hunter on the move again, this time prepared to crush him against the titanium wall at his back. He rolled to the left just in time, causing the Hunter to ram the wall with enough force to rattle the entire room. It recoiled, staggering back.

"Easy," Jason whispered, knowing that, if he fired the Beam Rifle as quickly as he had done last time, it would overheat and be useless to him for a few more precious seconds. He fired and waited for a second before firing again. The two shots penetrated the Hunter's exposed "back" as they had done before. It staggered and turned to face him, just in time to take a final shot to its worm-made face.

A final groan, and it fell to the floor.

"Oh, thank God." Jason said, relieved to see the giant alien crippled on the ground. He spun a full circle, ready to help his teammates if they needed it, but things appeared to be under control.

Blaine had already taken his own Hunter down, leaving the creature indented several inches in the south wall, and was nearby when one of the behemoths pinned the Elite, U'svere, to the ground with its huge armored limb. Before the alien could even consider firing its mounted Fuel Rod Cannon, Blaine had tackled it from behind, wrestling with the creature as they both rolled across the floor.

After a few seconds on the ground, the Hunter twisted suddenly and used its arm to send Blaine into the air and soaring for several yards before hitting the ground, skidding, and finally stopping. The white-clad Spartan stood up holding his typical weapon, a Gravity Hammer.

"Now you've pissed me off!" He yelled, raising the giant bludgeon. It was at that moment that Blaine pulled a new trick from his bag that none of the Spartans had ever even imagined.

He ran for only a few steps before jumping a foot off the ground and bringing the hammer straight down in front of him. Its head came down, between his legs, and crashed into the ground directly behind him. The result was that the gravitational field the hammer created sent the Spartan flying toward the unsuspecting Hunter like a several ton missile.

Blaine dropped the hammer almost immediately and flew at the alien with his right fist out in front of him. He crashed into the Hunter and it flew back, directly into the titanium wall with Blaine still attached to its front. He began pounding away at it with his biomechanical hands and, after softening it up, started ripping pieces of its armor from the giant.

When he finally took a step back, the alien tank fell first to its "knees," and then flat onto the ground, the orange blood of the countless Lekgolo worms that made up the creature pouring out onto



the floor.

Jason smiled to himself, turning to watch the others. Stephanie was easily holding her own, using the same ability that Blaine had exercised in their last Hunter-encounter. Her shields were gone, but she had her Hunter's metal-clad limb twisted clean around its back. The creature struggled to get free, but Stephanie only twisted further.

"Oh no," Jason gasped unbelievably. He had a gut-wrenching feeling that something gruesome was about to happen.

As the alien fought to get free, Stephanie used the rest of her enhanced strength to twist the creature's arm even further and yanked with all her might. Orange blood flowed freely onto the floor as the armored limb was ripped clean off the Hunter's body. The behemoth fell to the ground, each individual worm writhing in pain. As Stephanie put the arm down, Jason noticed that the arm was twitching as well, probably because the Lekgolo that made it up were also still in agonizing pain.

"Damn," Jason whispered, still watching the writhing alien worms. After several seconds, they finally stopped, and he made one last glance around the room. Samuel had one of the Hunters face-down on the floor and was firing both Shotguns into its back. Landon had somehow finished his own alien behemoth with a single Shotgun of his own. The last one still fighting it out was the Field Master, Ahrmonro.

The gold-armored Sangheili, to be blunt, was in a league all his own. He may not have had the strength or the speed a few of the Spartans had, but he'd seen more battles than they could dream of. As the last standing Hunter swung back and forth at him with its giant armored limb, he dodged nimbly back and forth, even jumping over the strikes as easily as if Ezekiel or Victoria had done it themselves.

And, as he jumped back and forth, rolling around the Hunter's strikes and sidestepping any shots it took with its Fuel Rod Cannon, he was constantly firing his twin Plasma Rifles, letting the blue plasma burn away at the Lekgolo that made up the Covenant soldier.

Finally, the Elite had had enough. As the Hunter swung its massive arm up from the ground in an effort to fling Ahrmonro as another had done to Jason earlier, the Field Master nimbly jumped to the left and primed a Plasma Grenade. Before the lumbering giant could even bring its arm back down, the Elite had stuck its hand deep into the creature's abdomen, inside the worms. He pulled his clawed hand out and stepped away just as the beast's "stomach" spontaneously exploded in a blue shower of energy.

The Hunter let out another roar and fell to the ground, just as the others had done before it. Jason stared in awe as the Field Master attached his Plasma Rifles to magnetic points on his armor and walked over to Samuel.

"Thank you for your help," Samuel said to the Elites. "We would've had-"

"Stephanie!" Landon yelled, cutting him off as he ran up to the female Spartan. He motioned to the Hunter on the floor that she'd

killed. "You ripped that thing's arm off! Just like that, you ripped it the Hell **\*\*off\*\***!" He made a scene with his arms that was apparently supposed to mimic Stephanie's movements, complete with sound-effects.

Samuel shook his head. "Yes," he said, mildly annoyed, "everyone did very well, given the circumstances and our lack of ammunition." He paused. "Reload your weapons and get ready to go. We've still got a bomb to plant."

\* \* \*

><p>"Alright," Ezekiel said to the AI residing somewhere in his head. "Just remember, six seconds after the last light goes out. After that, wait two seconds, and no more."<p>

Demon scoffed loudly. "I heard you the first four times."

"Good," Zeke snapped, "then maybe **â€** just **\*\*maybe\*\*** **â€** you'll do something right for once." He paused for a moment. "You're sure you can get into the security system?"

Again, the AI sounded annoyed. "Yes," it said, "I'm certain of it. The measures are good; that's why the Brutes haven't been able to get into the room with the NOVA Bombs yet. Trust me<sup>â€</sup>I'm just a little sneakier than that."

"You'd better be."

A second later, Ezekiel pulled the neuro-chip from his helmet and inserted it into one of the security slots on the door-panel to the next room. It had a blue glow to it when he first pulled it from his helm but, when he took it back from the panel, it was dull, colorless.

"Okay," he said, turning to Victoria. "Demon's in the system. You know the plan?"

"I'm all set."

"Good."

The black-armored Spartan turned to the door leading into the room the Elites had warned them about and took a deep breath before kicking it wide open.

"Demon!" one of the Brute Chieftains in the room roared almost instantly. The familiar smirk crossed the Spartan's face.

\_Always such gifted speakers,\_ he thought, pulling the M6G Pistol from its holster on his thigh. He took aim at one of the four giant fluorescent lights on the ceiling, the one furthest from him.

"I hope you freaks aren't afraid of the dark." He snapped, squeezing the trigger. The Pistol fired and the light shattered, cutting a fourth of the light from the room. As the Brutes and Hunters roared, and a few began to fire, he moved his aim and fired twice more, shattering another two lights.

Now, the only light that remained was the one directly above his

head.

A Brute Chieftain, armed with a hammer, charged him, but the Spartan only smiled. "Sorry," he said, "I'm a little busy to play with you right now." With that, he pointed the gun straight up and shattered the last remaining light, plunging the room into almost total blackness. The only luminous source left was the open door behind him, which Victoria quickly shut as she entered the room.

The moment the light went out, the room was sent into chaos. Ezekiel, with his armor's enhanced infrared vision, was able to see the aliens easily and dodge around them without a sound as he took off for the door at the far end of the room. Victoria beat him there by a full second and was waiting anxiously for it to open.

Zeke counted the last few seconds in his head, and the door finally slid open, spilling light into the room and sending a red flash into his eyes when his infrared vision caught a glimpse of the next room. He cursed as he ducked through the door and heard it slam shut behind him two seconds later.

"That's it." Victoria said. "We're in!"

Zeke scowled, his eyes burning as he practically slammed his neuro-chip into the door-panel. He removed it and reinserted it into his helmet, instantly feeling Demon's cold, annoying presence.

"Not again," the AI said laughingly, "it's so dark and empty up here."

"Shut it." Zeke snapped. "We've got work to do. You **\*\*do\*\*** remember work, don't you?"

"No more than you remember humility, I'm afraid."

\* \* \*

><p>"There are two groups of the Demons," Gronuss said to the Prophet's image on the screen in front of him. He bowed low to the titanium floor. "One of them is on the tenth floor; the other has reached the ground floor."<p>

The Prophet scowled, perched in his floating throne. "You were unable to stop them, Gronuss?"

"Yes, Hierarch," the Brute Chieftain said shamefully. He still could not believe that, with nearly sixty soldiers, the humans had still managed to escape him. "I have failed."

To his surprise, the Prophet only smiled. "No matter," he said. "That leaves us with our last option. Plant the charges."

The Brute grinned.

"When they go off, search the structure and kill any of them you can find." The Prophet paused, drawing a deep breath. "Then return to the ship."

"Yes, Holy One."

The screen suddenly faded to black and the Brute turned around to face the rest of the Covenant soldiers in the room, grinning and baring his fangs.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: So, that's 34! I know, nothing "spectacular," but it's the second-to-last one for this segment, so I hope you all liked it at least a little bit. Anyways, the next one will be posted fairly soon...sooner if I get the reviews I'm used to (where have you all gone? lol. Except for four loyal readers, all mentioned above.). But no, seriously, I look forward to any and all reviews I get, and, as always, I promise to respond at the intro to the next chapter. All those who are just now catching up, know that I miss hearing from you, and I hope you'll drop me a line for this one!<strong>

\*\*Thanks again for reading! And, as they would say on TV: Next time, Zulu Company will realize the full, horrific capacity of the Brutes and the Covenant Loyalists. The soldiers' bonds will be threatened, their lives put in situations more dangerous than ever before. Next chapter: "An Impossible Choice." See you all later!\*\*

\*\*NOTE: (Added for the review swarm, lol): The above comment about my "loyal readers" was only meant as a joke, lol. It was my way of saying that, after almost 3 weeks of being unable to post, and then posting, I was missing hearing from a lot of people, a lot of whom make my day with their reviews. I wasn't trying to dis those who hadn't gotten around to reviewing, lol. Trust me, I understand how busy life gets, and I'm thankful anyone does. So rest assured, I wasn't trying to dog anyone, lol. I just missed you all. Just in case...that's my 2 cents. Thanks again everyone!\*\*

## 36. Chapter 35: An Impossible Choice

\*\*Author's Notes: Okay...I finally got this one the way I want it. I really hope no one will hate me for this, but a friend of mine proofread this for me and made a suggestion that I split it into two chapters. I thought about it, looked at it...and I liked the idea. I promise you, the other half is already nearly finished, and I did this for the benefit of the readers. Perhaps, after these next couple of chapters, it will become clearer as to why. For now, Reviews!\*\*

\*\*zned51: lol, and I appreciate your reading! No, but really, I was really just kidding about the "four loyal readers," and I hope no one actually took that offensively. As I made an ending note in the last chapter, I just missed hearing from everyone. But, thanks for taking the time to review the last one and let me know you're still around!\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: Well, I took your advice. Tell me if it turned out quite like you were thinking. And, for the record, lol, I was just messin'. I know with college and RAing and such, you've always got a lot on your mind/plate (whichever phrase floats your boat). Thanks for your review and all your help on this last one!\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: lol. Glad you liked the last one. But...you will get more! Promise, lol. And if you thought last time was tense...I

really want to hear what you think this time. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114 (Twice, lol): First, lol, don't worry about the reviews' times. I understand what being busy is all about. I just hope you enjoyed your skiing trip. Sounds like a blast (though, a little cold for me, I must admit). I'm glad you liked Blaine's parts. I enjoyed writing them quite a bit.\*\*

\*\*Also, in regards to 34, again, forget the time, lol. I completely understand and am just happy to hear from everyone. But, for the chapter itself: I'm trying to make it so that the Spartans are really beginning to show their true skills, even while fatigued and stressed. And yes, Zeke is still...well, Zeke. A mixture of loathing, frustration at his lack of compassion, and perhaps a sense of acknowledgement for the actual skill is what I'm trying to hit. Let me know if I ever peg it right on the head. Finally, yeah, I will always treat the Elites as warriors and not "cannon fodder," as another reviewer mentioned. I loved them in the game, and I'll continue that trend in my stories. lol, the Brutes...they can burn and die. ;)\*\*

\*\*Lastly, in response to your question: I intend on starting the next segment right away. However, I may take up to two weeks of time just to research and write the chapters out. They'll be uploaded and ready once I get them done, but I may take just a bit to actually post. This is so that, with an oncoming wave of dozens of scholarships in early April, I have the necessary time to get them done.\*\*

\*\*HOWEVER, if I decide the time is unneeded, I will post ASAP. Just a heads-up. :)\*\*

\*\*alonsis 2: Hey, thank you! I'm glad to hear from someone else who likes this story. Personally, Ezekiel is my favorite too. ;) As for your question...well, I didn't think it made sense either, but some things the UNSC and HIGHCOM did were...questionable in my eyes. So, I figured it was acceptable. Thanks very much for your compliments and, if all goes well, Writer's Block will plague me no more.\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey, I must be losing my mind. I really did look for the story. I found a HalfJaw profile, but no "Killer-HalfJaw," so would you be kind enough to post a link in your next review, or perhaps just send me a copy? Thanks much. Also, when it does take off, I hope you can make it as good as or better than mine. All that means is that there's one more good story for me to read!\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: Well, it's not over QUITE as quickly as I thought it would be, but I promise, it's for the best. So many questions...well, you might have a few more when this one's over. Thanks for your compliments and review!\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: I agree COMPLETELY with your take on the Brutes. Halo 3, even on Legendary, was cake compared to, say, "Cairo Station" in H2. This wasn't because of new weapons or the equipment or the level-design. This was because, compared to the Sangheili, the Brutes SUCK. You strip them of their armor and they fry against a Battle Rifle. It's pitiful, really. Don't get me wrong; I loved having the

Elites as partners (except when they stuck me in their mass-throws against the Flood...grrrrrrr...), but I miss them as enemies even more. And what you said about Hammer VS Sword...you are 100-percent correct.\*\*

\*\*I'm glad someone else got a kick out of Blaine's "missile-launch." I always wanted to try that, but, alas, it doesn't work so well in-game. So, I did it in my own little world, lol. I agree with the statement on the Rag-doll Physics as well...amusing, but unrealistic (then again, in Bungie's defense, how much of Halo is? lol).\*\*

\*\*lol, and finally, the bit about Blaine...I guess I didn't get that across quite the way I intended. I mean, I wanted him to be "surprisingly accurate," but only to some extent. Like, because he only carries a Hammer and Rockets most of the time, it was somewhat shocking that he could absolutely smite a series of Covenant soldiers with perfect headshots in a matter of seconds. The fact that he could aim and shoot well was to be a given, I guess, but maybe not the extent of his accuracy. Regardless, I suppose you are right about their training and their efficiency. I just wanted a way to express the shock of his teammates at his accuracy, having rarely seen it.\*\*

\*\*AosUnderSol: lol...that still amuses me...;)\*\*

\*\*Samson00: No worries, lol, you've still read most of what I put up (thanks for proofing so many for me!). I figured you'd like Ahrmonro's part. He's your Elite, anyways (for anyone reading, Samson here helped me come up with the vast majority of my Sangheili names, so thank him for their kick-butt titles, lol). Blaine's part...well, I loved it. So much fun. And yes, I feel like the groove has finally returned!\*\*

\*\*Lecter42: hahaha, your comment still makes me laugh. I'm glad you enjoyed the Hunter-toss (that's my official patent for it, lol) and the battles involving the Sangheili. As you said, they deserve the respect they get, and I'm bound to give it to them. :) Also, I took your advice and read some of Soulguard's works...EXCELLENT. You were completely right. I've only gotten through the Mirrator, but it was great, far better than my own. Finally, in regards to Zeke...well, as I said above, going for loathing, frustration and acknowledgement of skill, so let me know if I ever hit it perfect, lol. \*\*

\*\*NOW, after so long...it's time for Chapter 35.  
Ready...Set...Go!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 35:<strong>

â€" \*\*An Impossible Choice â€"\*\*

\*\*1800 Hours - January 2, 2553\*\*

\*\*Inside the Research Station - Los Angeles, California\*\*

"We've got to be getting close." Stephanie said, opening a door and running a quick scan of the next room. "This is the ninth floor."

Samuel nodded. "That's right. We don't have much further to go. Just a few more floors an-"

"Spartans," a voice echoed in each of the soldiers' heads. It was male and familiar. "I'm afraid we have another change of plans for you."

Stephanie nearly exploded, as did several other Spartans. "Another one?" Blaine asked bitterly. "You have got to be kidding me."

"This is General Coleman." The voice said, and Stephanie rolled her eyes. She had been well aware of who it was long before the pompous General had given them his name. "Need I remind you that I am your superior officer and I am the one calling the shots in this mission?"

"No, General," Samuel spoke up with the slightest hint of disgust in his voice. "What is the change?"

"You should actually be happy this time, Spartans." The General said. "I'm making your lives easier. You no longer have to get to the bottom floor. Now, all I want you to do is get to the sixth floor and plant the charge. After that, you're free to get the Hell out of there and return to base. Do you copy, Zulu Company?"

"Yes sir," Samuel said, "we copy. The sixth floor; got it."

"Good. Remember: fifteen minutes."

\* \* \*

><p>"Hurry up, will ya?" Ezekiel said as he transferred Demon into one of the security panels near the two NOVA Bombs. Victoria barely heard him. She was too focused on the giant explosives.<p>

They were huge. Each bomb (or, at least, each bomb's casing) stood nearly twelve feet tall and had a square base as wide as a Warthog. The casings were completely black and perfect squares. Victoria would've never known what they were, had she not already been informed.

"Alright," a voice echoed over the room's loudspeakers. "NOVA Bombs are moving now. Everyone please step away from the moving floor."

Victoria recognized Demon's voice and quickly took a step back from the two NOVA Bombs. As she did so, the floor beneath them revealed itself to be a kind of conveyor belt, sliding the two bombs toward a pair of elevators that had risen up straight out of the floor.

"Wow," she whispered, watching as the enormous explosives were loaded into the two elevators. The moment they were both inside the giant cases, the doors slammed shut and they dropped, back down below the floor. Instantly, the floor ceased to move and a set of sliding panels covered the shafts the bombs had just dropped through.

In a second, the whole room was empty and it would've been impossible for anyone to guess where the bombs had disappeared to. The shafts of

a moment before were covered and their camouflage was flawless. The conveyor belts had not a single piece to distinguish them from the rest of the titanium floor.

"Yes," Zeke said, pulling his neuro-chip from the security panel. "We are officially done. 'Bout damn time."

Victoria nodded, letting out a small sigh of relief. They'd done it, somehow. They'd saved the world.

"Now," Ezekiel said, interrupting her brief moment of happiness, "ready to go try and fight sixty Covies?"

Victoria cursed under her breath. She'd forgotten. Before, she'd been ready and willing to fight the aliens. Now, she simply wanted to go home. "Let's get this over with." She said, drawing her Energy Sword. Ezekiel did the same and led the way to the door.

"This is it," he said, bracing himself. "Oneâ€|twoâ€|three!" he threw the door open and raised his own blade, charging in, ready to meet whatever aliens awaited the them. Victoria rushed in beside him, scanning the room.

It was empty.

"What the Hell?" Zeke said disbelievingly. "Where the **\*\*Hell\*\*** is everybody?"

Victoria glanced around, suddenly getting a horrible feeling in her stomach. Something wasn't right. The Covenant â€" the Brutes â€" didn't just quit. Hell, they'd sooner throw the corpses of the Grunts at you until you suffocated than just give up and go home.

"This isn't right." She said. "I think something's really wr-"

At that moment, something exploded a few floors above them, and the entire station shook and rattled as if it had been hit with an earthquake.

\* \* \*

><p>"What the Hell is that!" Landon yelled, more as a statement than a question. The Spartans had just cleared another room of Covenant, planted the last remaining charge, and stepped into the last room before reaching another staircase when something exploded beneath them, shaking the entire Research Station.<p>

"I have no idea!" Samuel said. "But we need to go! Zeke and Victoria are down there!" As the station started to calm, the giant Spartan charged forward, crashing through the door leading to the stairs-

And he stopped there, in the doorway.

"What's up Sam?" Jason yelled as the other four Spartans and the two Sangheili worked to catch up. "What is it?"

"No," the giant Spartan's voice echoed low in Landon's head. His voice was exhausted and hopeless. "No-no-noâ€|"



When he finally reached the doorway, Landon understood.

Whatever had detonated below them had triggered a series of smaller blasts inside the staircase strong enough to shatter the walls and ceiling and cause them to fall in on the stairs.

It was at that moment that Landon realized something else: the Spartans weren't trying to "get to ground level," as they'd been told. Ground-level was somewhere above them. They were a minimum of a-hundred feet below the ground already. At least, that's what the enormous stones that had fallen onto the stairs were alluding to.

"We have to get them out!" Stephanie said, taking hold of a giant stone and straining to move it from the staircase. Blaine was right there with her, gripping the giant stones and hefting them as best he could.

"Zeke!" Samuel yelled, apparently not bothering to broadcast his voice only to the Spartans on the lower levels, "Victoria! Can you hear me?"

After a moment, an answer came. "Yeah, Goliath," Zeke said. "We hear you." The Spartan paused. "We got bad news."

Samuel shook his head quickly. "I know," he said. "I know. We felt it too. The staircase--"

"Is blocked," Ezekiel finished. "Yeah, I know. We can't get up it." He paused again, then added hopelessly, "We're trapped down here."

\* \* \*

><p>"Have you planted the charges yet?" Victoria's voice echoed in Samuel's ears. He shook his head again, feeling his calm starting to go.<p>

"Yes," he said. "I'm sorry. We didn't know."

"You couldn't have known." Zeke said. "Forget it. You need to get out of here."

Samuel's eyes went wide. "I'm not going anywhere! We're not leaving until we get the two of you out of there!" He couldn't believe the black-armored Spartan had even suggested it.

"Sam!" Zeke yelled. "Don't be a fool! There's no time. Those charges are set to go off in less than fifteen minutes. You can't possibly get this staircase cleared and get us out of here in that amount of time! You just can't!"

At that moment, the Field Master walked up beside him. "Demon," he said patiently. Samuel nodded to him and focused on the two Spartans below.

"One second, guys." He said, forcing himself to acknowledge the Sangheili when he wanted nothing more than to talk with his team. "What is it, Field Master?"

The gold-armored Elite looked mildly uncomfortable. "I respect your

need to free your teammates," he said, "but the charges have been planted, and U'svere and I must go."

Samuel nodded. He understood. "It's alright." He said. "We'll catch you later."

The Elite nodded. "I will personally call for your evacuation once I reach the surface," he said. "You have my word."

"Thank you," Samuel said. A second later, the two alien soldiers took off down the hall and disappeared into the room they had just come from, only a few minutes before.

"Zeke's right." Victoria echoed the other Spartan, bringing Samuel back to their conversation. "You have to go."

Samuel shook his head furiously, still refusing to believe it. "I won't leave you behind." He said. "I won't do it. We're staying here."

"Damn it, Sam!" Ezekiel shouted, clearly furious. "There's no damned time! If you stay here, we're all gonna die!"

He continued to shout, but Samuel couldn't hear him. He was too busy trying to think of a way to save the two Spartans. Finally, he came up with an idea. It was desperate, but he had to try.

"Command!" he yelled, trying to open a link. "General Coleman! This is \*\*Spartan 025\*\* of Zulu Company! This is Samuel King! Please respond!"

No answer.

"Please, General!" He yelled, getting more desperate. "Answer me!"

Still nothing.

Samuel slammed his giant, armored fist into the nearest wall, making a four-inch dent in it as if it were plastic. "Please," he whispered, his breath coming in short, shallow gasps.

"Somebodyâ€¦anybodyâ€¦answer me."

"Samuel," a voice answered. The Spartan couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Corporal?" he asked, unbelieving.

"That's right, Sam." Corporal Charles said. "I'm listening."

\* \* \*

><p>"Corporal Charles!" The Spartan's voice echoed all around the room that the man was in. He was surrounded with superiors, including General Coleman, a pair of ONI spooks the names of which hadn't been revealed to him, four Sergeant Majors, and a half-dozen Corporals like himself.<p>

"What is it, Sam?" He asked, genuine compassion flooding his voice uncontrollably. That was his weakness, the higher-ups said: he cared

too much about each individual Spartan and not enough for the cause.

"Are you at HIGHCOM?"

"Yes I am." The Corporal said. "I'm with the General and everyone else in charge of this mission. I see you got the bombs planted. Excellent job."

"Thank you, sir." Samuel said, clearly exasperated. "But I need your help." The Spartan's voice made it sound like he was about to die.

"What do you need, Samuel?" The Corporal asked, worried. He could tell that something had gone terribly wrong, but he had no idea what.

"The bombs," he gasped, "I need someone to slow the timers on the bombs. We need more time!"

"What?" Charles asked, puzzled. "Why? The NOVA Bombs are already taken care of, according to the security records."

"Yes," Samuel said irritably, "they are. But the Covenant set charges of their own. Zeke and Victoria are still on the bottom floor! They're trapped down there! We have to clear the staircase to get them out!"

At that moment, one of the men from ONI turned on a closed-circuit television on the wall. On the screen, Charles could see the image being sent from a security camera in the room with the Spartans. Samuel was leaning heavily against a wall, shoulders drooped, fists clenched.

"I don't think we can, Sam." Charles said as kindly as he could manage. "The Covenant have another contingent of dropships coming into orbit. They're headed straight for the structure. We can't afford to let them reach it and disarm the bombs. We can't let them find the NOVA's!"

"No!" The Spartan yelled, and Charles watched him slam a fist into the wall. "Corporal, please! We just need time. I'll watch the bombs myself!" He paused, and suddenly Ezekiel's voice was projected throughout the room.

He was talking to Samuel.

"Damn it! Would you listen to me? There's no time! I know it sucks, but it's your job to make the call and get everyone else out! If you stay here for us, everybody dies!"

"I'm not abandoning a member of my team, Zeke! Now shut up!"

"It's not a choice, Sam! Either two people die, or seven people die! That's it. It's not a damned choice!" The Spartan paused, catching his breath. "I will not have your blood on my hands!"

"But you're more than content to leave yours on mine!" Samuel snapped back. For a minute, there was no answer. Everyone in the HIGHCOM branch stood silent, stunned.

"Our blood's not gonna be on your hands." Victoria interrupted. "If you have to blame someone, blame the Covenant! You aren't responsible for this. And don't you can't possibly believe anything different than that!"

At this, Samuel must've cut the connection between himself and the other Spartans, because the channel was silent except for his breathing. Finally, he focused on the men at HIGHCOM again.

"Please," he said pleadingly, "I'm asking you: slow the timers."

The Corporal couldn't even look at the screen. He couldn't look Sam in the eyes. He knew that it was a one-way feed and that the Spartan couldn't see him anyway, but it didn't matter. He turned to the General and mouthed, "please."

The man's normally stone-cold features softened to a hurt, destroyed expression. He shook his head slowly, mouthing, "I'm sorry."

Corporal Charles put his head down, his eyes on his shoes. "I'm sorry Sam." He said.

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine was moving another stone when he heard something crash to the ground behind him. He turned completely around to see Samuel on one knee with his hand bracing against the wall. The giant Spartan's chest was moving slowly in exaggerated movements as he breathed shallow, painful breaths of air.<p>

Blaine knew immediately the answer he'd gotten.

"Blaine!" a male's voice echoed in his head. He recognized it instantly.

"Still alive, Zeke?" he asked.

"For now," the Spartan answered emotionlessly. "But you need to listen to me for a minute."

"Can't," Blaine said plainly as he picked up another rock, "little busy."

"Doing what?"

"Moving stones, that's what."

"Well knock it off!" Zeke yelled. "Listen to me! I don't know if Samuel's gonna make the call to get everyone out. He's blocked any kind of connection I can make with him."

"We can do that?" Blaine asked, then added mockingly, "If I had known that, I'd have done it long ago." He was still smiling as he moved another stone. His mind had refused to process the idea that his teammates could be left to die. It simply didn't register.

"I'm not kidding!" He said. "Now you have to help me and get Samuel

out of there! If he goes, everyone else will follow him." Blaine scoffed, but Zeke kept going. "I don't care if you have to **\*\*drag\*\*** his giant ass all the way to the Pelican; get the Hell out of here!"

"Zeke, do you remember the talk we had with General Coleman before we came down here?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I won't follow the orders of a General over Sam's, what in God's green Earth makes you think I'll follow yours?"

"Damn it, Blaine!" Zeke yelled again. "Why won't anyone listen to me?"

"Enough." Samuel said, cutting into the conversation. Just like that, every Spartan stopped what they were doing. "We're leaving."

"What?" Zeke sounded surprised, but not hurt by the statement.

"You're right. HIGHCOM won't slow the timers, and there's no way we can get you out of here in time." He stopped for a moment. "You were right, Zeke. It's not a choice."

Blaine heard the pitch-dark Spartan laugh. "It's about damn time someone listened to me for a change."

Samuel sighed. "Zeke, Victoriaâ€¦I'm sorry."

"So am I," Victoria said sadly.

Blaine could hear Magnus' voice in his head. He could hear the conversation they'd had about protecting Victoria. Quickly, he focused on her. "Magnus is gonna kick my ass." He said it in jest, but there was more than a slight echo of sadness in his voice.

The female Spartan laughed quietly. "He'll understand." She said confidently. "It was just the way things worked out."

"Enough!" Ezekiel shouted, still irritated. Blaine hadn't been aware he'd been listening. "You can stop the ridiculous sentiment! If I have to die, I'd prefer it if you all didn't cause me to vomit first!" He scoffed loudly from the other end of the link.

"Fair enough," Samuel said bitterly. "Let's get out of here."

With that, the brown-armored Spartan led the way out of the room, and up toward the entrance of the structure.

\* \* \*

><p>"Well," Victoria said, slouching up against a wall, defeated, "that's it then. It's over."<p>

Ezekiel scowled. He didn't want to admit it, but it really seemed that way. The staircase had so many boulders and metal sheets that he couldn't have cleared it in an hour, much less â€" he checked his watch â€" thirteen minutes.

"It looks like it." He said. Sighing, he backed up against a wall, crossing his arms at his chest and bending one knee, letting the bottom of his foot rest against the wall behind him. If he could think of a way to get out, that would be how.

"There might be a way." A familiar voice sounded in his mind. Ezekiel sighed. The AI was at it again.

"A way out?" he asked.

"You remember the schematics I was speaking of earlier, before you circumvented the last group of Covenant?"

Zeke sighed. "Yes."

"The elevator?" the AI asked. Suddenly, it clicked.

"Of course!" the Spartan shouted. "How the Hell could I forget that?"

"Well," the AI answered, "I've always been puzzled by your stup-"

"Not now!" He said, and turned to Victoria. "Vic! Get up!" She glanced up at him, but didn't get up. "Get the Hell up! We're going home, damn it! Now!"

"What are you talking about?" She asked, puzzled.

"The elevator shaft!" he answered. "It leads to the eighth floor. If we're lucky, it might still be open!"

At that, the female Spartan was up and darting for the door like a track-star, outrunning Ezekiel as if he was crawling. \_That's not even right,\_ he thought, working to keep pace.

Victoria ran straight through the room that had once held the NOVA Bombs and kept going, bashing open the next door. She ran into the next room and Ezekiel heard her yell something profane.

He hastened his pace and ran inside, stopping instantly and cursing under his breath. Before them stood a pair of Hunters, strategically positioned directly in front of the next doorway.

"I thought the Covenant left the base when they planted their charges." Victoria said. Ezekiel scowled.

"Apparently these two didn't get the memo."

"I'll take one, you take the other?"

"Sure."

With that, Ezekiel took the Energy Sword from his waist. It was all he had left. He charged the nearest Hunter, dodging to the left as a giant beam of green plasma rushed toward him. He reached the alien and started jabbing with the blade, only to have it blocked at every turn by the Hunter's impenetrable armor.

"I don't have time for this!" The Spartan roared, jumping into the air and coming down on the Hunter in an effort to find a weak-point. He leapt around as fast as he could, darting at the beast from every side with the sword, but nothing seemed to be good enough. On the rare occasion that he actually connected with the blade, the creature would roar in agony, but otherwise, it seemed unfazed.

Suddenly, Ezekiel made a mistake. Perhaps it was his focus on getting to the elevators. Perhaps it was the stress and fatigue of fighting for so long without a break. Hell, it might've even been the cry of pain that his fellow Spartan was letting out somewhere behind him. All he knew was that, after one false step, the Hunter had swung its great arm and smashed him into the nearest wall like a toy. As he connected, he felt a terrible pain in his left side, both the arm and the leg.

Before the Spartan could even fall to the ground, the alien was on him, pressing him harder into the wall with its giant, metal-plated limb. He found he could move his legs or, to be exact, **\*\*leg\*\***. His left leg was completely numb and entirely immobile.

The Hunter let out a low growl and pressed harder. Ezekiel felt his left arm being crushed and still couldn't find the strength to move his leg. Suddenly, the cannon on the creature's shoulder swiveled to face him and began to glow bright green.

\_This is it,\_ he thought.

Suddenly, there was a scream as the other Hunter smashed Victoria into a wall, face-first. The Hunter holding Ezekiel turned for a second to watch.

\_Can't die yet,\_ the Spartan thought angrily. \_Too many things left undone. Too much left to live for.\_ He braced himself, pushing the seething pain to the darkest recesses of his mind. Each thought burned, echoing in his head with fierce pride and defiance even as his body cracked and broke before the giant Hunter.

\_She can't die yet.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Jason walked up first as Samuel reached the exit the Spartans had been searching for. It was the same one they'd entered through, and was still wide open. The giant Spartan stopped, waiting for each and every one of the others to go through before he himself stepped out of the now-dismal-looking building and into the sunlight.<p>

"We're out!" Landon yelled as he stepped out further into the light. They once again found themselves at the top of the large incline leading to the structure's main entrance and looking down at the city.

"There's a parking lot down there." Jason said, pointing. "That's our best bet for extraction, don't you think?"

Samuel nodded. "Let's go."

At that, he took off down the hill, leading the rest of the group in total silence to the flat ground.

That hike was different for the entire team and, while pitifully short, felt to Samuel like the longest, most painful journey he'd ever made. It wasn't the stress that caused him to feel this way. It wasn't even the nonstop fighting the Spartans had engaged in without a moment's rest. It was the fact that, in his eyes, he had failed.

He'd left two members of his team to die. Risking a hateful glance backwards, the Spartan scowled. They were stuck in the bowels of that miserable structure and there was absolutely nothing that he could do about it. Ezekiel Veron and Victoria Small were somewhere in the lowest levels, ready to accept their fate without a moment's hesitation.

Again, he scowled. Samuel knew that, if he were in their shoes, he'd have said and done the same things, hands-down, every time.

But he **\*\*wasn't\*\*** in their shoes. He was in **\*\*his\*\*** shoes; his giant brown boots that small elephants could've comfortably worn. And he hated it. He had the responsibility of his whole team—and it counted for nothing. Somehow, Samuel was still forced to leave them behind.

HIGHCOM had denied him assistance. Ezekiel and Victoria had made it abundantly clear that they refused to be rescued at the risk of the team. Even the Sangheili had left for evacuation, knowing deep down that his efforts would go unrewarded.

Reaching the lot, Samuel stopped cold, stomping his right foot as hard as he could into the concrete and leaving a massive, boot-shaped hole nearly eight inches deep. His fists clenched subconsciously at his sides, gritted so tightly that, had it not been for the MJOLNIR armor, they'd have been bleeding.

"Sam," Jason said, trying to get his attention.

Instead of turning to his teammate, as was typical of him, Samuel did the polar opposite, ignoring him completely in favor of his chaotic mixture of bitter thoughts and full-hearted attempts at coming up with a way to save his two Spartans.

"Samuel!"

"What?" He asked, giving up.

"I've called for EVAC. They'll be here in eight."

The leading Spartan checked the time on his HUD and sighed.

\_Ten minutes left.\_ He thought, timing the bombs. Silently, he looked up to the sky and began to pray for a miracle. Suddenly, something bright in his field of vision reflected the sunlight from above the thin clouds. He could barely make out strips of purple and grey metal moving quickly—getting larger—getting closer.

Blaine was the first to react. He grabbed the Gravity Hammer from his back. "Oh, shit."

\* \* \*



><p><strong>Author's Notes: Like I said, don't hate me for the Cliffhanger! lol. I promise, it's only to help everyone get their money's worth. I know how it all ends anyway, so spacing it doesn't hurt or help me...but it's in the readers' best interest. Just give this one a day or two to sit and stir...and then I'll have the next chapter up by Saturday or Sunday. I just want this one to simmer for a while, not for the pain of wanting to know, but just so that you can all get the proper response from it. Love it or hate it...let me know. Thanks all! Talk to you in a couple days!<strong>

### 37. Chapter 36: Miracles

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Alright, I don't want this to take any longer than it already has, so let me just apologize (once again) for the delay and say that, in the words of Ian Malcolm, "Life finds a way."**\*\***

**\*\*...To keep me from getting things done that I need to get done.** I've been so busy the past five days that I can't even begin to describe it and expect to get this thing up tonight. So, know that I apologize and that I hope you all don't hate me for the extended-length of the cliffhanger.**\*\***

**\*\*Now, Reviews!\*\***

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey! Thanks (as always) for your review, and I promise I will check out the story as soon as I have a free moment to myself. I've been absolutely swamped this week.**\*\***

**\*\*AosUnderSol:** lol, I don't know about "all monster on it," but he'll try. ;) **\*\***

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** Well, here's the second half of your idea for my "chapter-split," lol. Hope you like it as much as you liked the first half. lol, and you're right...it's hard to get tension when people know me and my writing so well...**\*\***

**\*\*Lecter42:** Okay, so you can't see me letting them die...well...yeah...I don't know. haha. But I have to ask..."be a hell of a chapter if I did"? lol. You want me to kill 'em off? ;) Also, I wondered if anyone would mention the Elites...pay attention and look for our alien friends this time around. Tell me what you think. Finally...I don't think there are any bolded words in this chapter, lol. Didn't need them. ;) Thanks for your review!**\*\***

**\*\*Taylor114:** Hey! Glad you liked it! And I'm glad you like Zeke as much as I do! But, as for who dies or doesn't die...you'll just have to wait and see. And yes, "inevitable" is a good word for that. Oh, and Zeke...yes, very much an "arsehole." He gets worse, lol. Samuel...I guess I just wanted to show that he cares for the team and he can't bear to leave them, but he wasn't given a whole lot of choice. When the choice is "two people die" or "seven people die," it's hard to rationalize the latter. **\*\***

**\*\*And, in regards to Soulguard:** ABSOLUTELY. The stories have been awesome! Though, I haven't had a whole lot of reading time, but...yeah, awesome up through all I've read.**\*\***

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Well, you're right, lol. That is typically how it happens. Though, this time, it's more because they're tired, they're stressed to the breaking point, and they have nothing but their Energy Swords. These are not the greatest weapons against Hunters...personally, I prefer a good S'plaser. ;) And thank you very, very much for your compliment...that made my day. :)\*\*

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian:** Hey! Thanks for your review! Yeah...this mission does get worse and worse, lol. But, I hope you find the ending you're hoping for up ahead!\*\*

**\*\*WolfyWolf:** Oh...sorry you hate cliffhangers, lol. It really wasn't meant to last this long. Life just kind of got in the way. And in regards to the lack of reviews before: well, if you don't have a computer, it's hard to review, isn't it? Trust me, I understand. :) I'm just glad to hear from you again!\*\*

**\*\*Fallen Angel Wings:** Hello new reviewer! I'm glad you like the story thus far. I'm curious...your review was for Chapter 3. How far have you gotten now? I think the writing got better as I went along (I'd like to think it did...lol). I promise I will give your story a look and send you a message as soon as I get a chance...lately, I've been scholarship, FFA, and test-crazy. Hopefully, it'll settle soon. Thanks again, and I hope you'll stick around!\*\*

**\*\*vernox:** lol, I'm sorry. That must really bite to have to copy and paste it all. It means a lot that you go through that to read this! I really do appreciate that! Also, I liked the Hunter-toss too...it was a blast to write. As for the cliffhanger...well, it fit. I don't like to do them, but it was fitting and I wanted a little tension. So, thanks for your review and I hope you like this next one!\*\*

**\*\*rimshooter:** lol, I know...my bad. ;) I sorry. I'll do better next time (assuming I don't get two exams, an essay and a test in two days, lol).\*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** hahaha! Your review made me laugh almost right out of my chair. I hope you really don't think I'm THAT bad, lol. It was just one cliffhanger. And I promise not to do it again. I wouldn't have done it this time, except I thought that this chapter would get long, and it was a fitting stopping point to get some tension. So...well, I sorry, lol. But...about what you said...thanks very much for the compliments! Hope you don't hate me too bad, lol. ;)\*\*

**\*\*hellhound cerberus:** Hey new reviewer! lol, thanks a lot for the positive notes on my writing "talent," lol. I wish I were as talented as everyone keeps giving me credit for. Anyways, in answer to your question: Not really. Things will change a little later on, but not to any great extent. I hope you'll stick around for the future chapters!\*\*

**\*\*Okay,** I'm sorry if the review responses were short this time...I really want to get this out there for you all. So, here it is!\*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 36:<strong>

â€" \*\*Miracles â€" \*\*

\*\*1830 Hours - January 2, 2553\*\*

\*\*Inside the Research Station - Los Angeles, California\*\*

"Alien bastard," Ezekiel growled lowly, still pinned mercilessly to the titanium wall from the waist up. To make matters worse, one of his legs was completely numb and adamantly refused to move, no matter how hard he tried.

Victoria let out another muffled yell somewhere behind the Hunter. Ezekiel had gathered that she was pinned similarly to the way he was, but her face was dug somewhere into the titanium.

He had also gathered, by her cries, that the alien was toying with her and enjoying her suffering, much like the one in front of Ezekiel was, pinning him harder and harder to the wall and listening to his bio-engineered bones cracking.

The Hunter growled again and its Fuel Rod Cannon began to glow a brighter shade of green. Zeke scowled, beckoning all his pain away into the back of his mind. It was now or never.

"See you in Hell." He said, gasping for the air that the giant alien was making harder and harder for him to obtain.

With all the strength he had, he forced his good leg to bend and thrust the blade on his knee forward, letting the glowing plasma cut a clean tear in the Hunter's unarmored abdomen. The creature roared but didn't draw away, and Ezekiel repeated the process again and again until, finally, it staggered backwards, enraged and gushing blood from its open wounds.

Limping and gasping for air inside his breastplate that had been smashed inward, the Spartan primed a Plasma Grenade and charged forward, sticking his hand into the open tear in the Hunter's body and leaving the primed grenade inside. A second later, the Hunter exploded from the inside, but Ezekiel was already forcing himself to run for the creature's brother at the far side of the room.

"Here we go," he said, letting glowing plasma surround the elbow-mounted blade on his right arm and holding a Spike Grenade in the same hand.

The Hunter was still turned away from him when he reached it, and the Spartan sliced a giant, gaping hole in the worms that made up its back with his plasma-coated blade. Before the Hunter could retaliate, he took the Spike Grenade, primed it, and stuck it vertically inside the creature, with the head facing straight up.

"You should pick on someone your own size." Zeke managed in a defiant tone as he backed away. The Hunter got one step before the grenade detonated, sending superheated spikes all the way up its body and through countless worms at once.

It fell over instantly in a bloody heap.

"Alright," he said, limping over to Victoria, who had since fallen from the wall and was resting on her back on the ground. "Vic, you okay?"

She didn't answer.

"Vic?" He checked her status on his HUD and found that, while she was alive, she was unconscious. "Oh, come on! Damn it!" He looked up at the ceiling, as he always did in such situations. "Can I catch a break, please? Just one damned break!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Why the Hell can't we get ten minutes to ourselves anymore?" Landon asked, scowling as a dozen Phantoms landed in an enormous circle around them, each one more than fifty-yards away.<p>

"What are they doing?" Stephanie asked. None of the Spartans could see what the Phantoms were releasing, and it was unusual for the Brutes to land so far away from their intended targets.

"I don't know." Samuel said. "But I don't like it. Everyone: get ready."

Blaine laughed coldly behind them. "So this is what stands between us and a nice hot meal, huh?" He swung the enormous Gravity Hammer around as if it were a toy. "I'll kill 'em all. Every last damn one."

Landon frowned behind his visor, holding the Shotgun close to his chest. It didn't matter anymore. The Covenant had failed. They'd secured the NOVA Bombs already. The aliens would never find them. To make things better, the Spartans were eight minutes from safety and the long, sleep-filled trip home.

And yet, somehow, Landon couldn't manage a smile for anything. Two of his teammates — his friends — were being left behind. They were going to die, and there wasn't a damned thing anyone could do to change it.

And here, in the midst of all of it, the Covenant were going to launch one last assault in a mad attempt to stop the Spartans from returning home with their lives.

Landon scowled, thinking of the aliens' charges and the two Spartans left in the structure. \_You freaks,\_ he thought bitterly, \_you're gonna pay. Mark my words, whatever you send at us this time, it's not coming back.\_

At that moment, his thoughts were interrupted by the roaring of an engine. It was big. Not big enough to be a Pelican or even a tank, but bigger than most vehicles. The Spartan grimaced.

"We've got Choppers, Sam." He said. The brown-clad Spartan nodded almost unnoticeably.

"I know," he said. A second later, he went into "leader-mode," turning to the group around him. "We've got limited ammo and

grenades," he said. "That means no screwing around. Aim for the kill in one shot if you can get it. If not, just focus on holding them off. We need about seven minutes, and then we're out of here."

Before any of the Spartans could respond, one of the giant Covenant vehicles came rushing toward them, boosting at the last second and missing Stephanie by less than a full foot. Instinctively, Landon turned and watched the Chopper as it circled around for another shot.

"What now?" Jason asked, raising his Beam Rifle.

"Put that away," Blaine snapped, moving between him and the Chopper. He raised the Gravity Hammer. The white-armored soldier looked directly at the vehicle as it began to rush toward them. "Come and get some, monkey-boy!"

The Brute swerved away from Blaine, perhaps to hit Samuel, but it never had a chance. The biomechanical Spartan swung the hammer like a bat and the combined force of the blow and the altered field of gravity sent the alien motorcycle rolling, all the way to the end of the parking lot-

Where it appeared to roll off a ledge, and vanished.

"Where'd it go?" Stephanie asked, raising her twin Maulers.

"I think it must ha-" Landon started to answer, but was cut off as Blaine pushed him to the side and swung the massive hammer once again, saving his life from a Brute Chopper that was coming straight for him from behind.

Landon started to say "thanks," but wasn't even able to stand up before another Chopper came from the left. He managed, just in time, to get his arm-shields between him and the Chopper's giant, spiked wheel, but it wasn't enough to save him. The impact crashed his shields and sent him rolling across the lot, groaning as he struggled to sit up.

"Landon!" Samuel yelled, running for him.

The downed soldier closed his eyes for only a second, gritting his teeth against the pain that was radiating through his chest and his back. Before he could even sit up, however, he heard another engine, and suddenly a pain unlike anything he'd ever imagined shot up both of his legs. He sat up in an instant, yelling in agony and looking down at his punctured and crushed legs as the Chopper sped away.

"Son of a-"

"Landon, move!" Someone yelled. Landon neither knew nor cared who.

"I can't, damn it!" He yelled back, a blood-red shade lighting up his HUD and over a dozen "WARNING" signs in all four corners of his vision. Horrible jolts of pain were shooting up and down his back and his chest felt like it was going to implode. His legs were shot. He was stuck on the ground in the middle of the open with a dozen

Choppers all zipping around.

Landon tried as hard as he could to stand, fuming and literally yelling for his legs to move. Unfortunately, it was all for nothing; he could only watch as the scrolling numbers at the sides of his HUD got lower and lower, some of them stopping only when they hit rock-bottom at zero.

He heard another Chopper's engine roar behind him, and the Spartan turned to meet the incoming vehicle.

"A little help here!" he shouted, putting his dual arm-shields between him and the oncoming Covenant craft. Even as he put his arms up, he knew that the action would be pointless. At the angle he was being forced to hold them, the Chopper would rip right through and then proceed to tear him apart without even slowing down.

\_Here we go,\_ he thought when he heard the engine get louder. The Brute pilot was boosting straight for him. Landon braced himself as best as he could with the blinding pain shooting up from his legs.

Suddenly, at the last second, another Spartan jumped in front of him. This one was clad in white and swinging a hammer whose head was as big as the Chopper's engine. There was a "BOOM" as the hammer struck down and detonated the front of the Chopper, and then Blaine turned around.

"One of these days," he said, "I'm teaching you what it means to look both ways." He paused, then added with a laugh, "maybe then, you won't get smacked quite so early in the fight."

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel groaned as he carried Victoria to the edge of the empty elevator shaft and looked up into the darkness. With his enhanced vision, he could make out a completely-empty shaft that extended all the way up to â€"presumably â€" the eighth floor.<p>

"Alright," he said, looking down to his comrade. "We made it. Now get the Hell up."

It wasn't even a slight surprise when the Spartan continued to lay there, unconscious.

"Aren't these suits supposed to guard against things like that?" Zeke asked bitterly, limping on his good leg. "You can't just keep going unconscious every time you get smacked into a wall by an eleven-foot alien, honestly. It's just not gonna work."

He looked up into the shaft. Normally, eight stories would be nothing, but on one leg, it was a daunting height.

"You're not actually thinking of jumping up that, are you?" Demon asked from the recesses of his mind.

"Yes and no," Ezekiel answered, flexing his right leg. Without another word, he jumped up and pressed his right foot up against the wall opposite the one he'd come in from. A second later, he used it as a brace and jumped backwards and up, this time bracing his right

foot on the wall behind him.

He smiled. It was painful, but, in essence, he was wall-jumping.

"And they said I'd never be able to do this shit," he snapped as he leapt off another wall. He was well over the fourth floor, and while his whole body was screaming, the Spartan forced the pain out. He had to know that he could make it up.

Then he'd go back for Victoria.

Ten seconds later, he emerged from the open door to the shaft on the eighth floor. "Dear Lord," he said, looking down at his leg, "that hurts like a banshee."

"It burns?" Demon asked, unknowing.

"Not like what you're thinking," Zeke said with a grin. He checked the time at the corner of his HUD. It read "6.44" and was counting down. "We've really gotta go." He said. A second later, he jumped back down the shaft, bracing his foot only once every couple of floors.

There was a dull thud as he finally fell lightly onto the bottom floor. He sighed, wincing as he limped toward Victoria.

"Time to go," he said calmly as he grabbed her arm in his right hand and draped it over his shoulder, positioning her behind him. He positioned his body to hold the arm there and reached around for her left arm. Taking it, he did the same and locked the two arms in place at his chest with the spiked protrusions coming from each of Victoria's wrists. When he was sure they were secure, he limped back to the shaft.

"Ezekiel," Demon said carefully, "I'm not sure this is a good idea. You only have one leg an-"

"Enough!" he snapped. "I know what you're thinking, and I don't like it either. Unfortunately, we've only got five minutes and it's the only way out of this God-forsaken Hellhole."

At that, the AI was silent. Ezekiel stepped up to the edge of the shaft.

\_Come on,\_ he thought, coaxing himself. He knew it was going to hurt like Hell. \_You can do this.\_

He braced on his right leg and jumped forward, thrusting his foot forward and propping it against the opposite wall before leaping backwards again. He had to angle his body forward to keep Victoria's limp form from hitting the wall. His foot connected with the wall behind him and he pushed off again.

\_Come on,\_ he thought as a seething pain began to eat away at his good leg. \_Just a little further\_—

He slipped. He went to put his foot against the wall in front of him and didn't push off quite quickly enough. The black-armored Spartan fell backwards and turned on his side in time to take the brunt of

the blow when he hit the steel floor twenty feet below him.

BOOM!

He felt his already-useless shoulder dislocate and crack as he smashed into the ground. Barely, Zeke had had time to angle Victoria's body so that she wouldn't hit the ground directly.

Slowly, painfully, he forced himself to stand on his right leg. He angled the unconscious Spartan behind him and got ready to go again.

"This is ludicrous, Zeke." Demon said. "There has to be another way. This can't work."

"It will work!" He yelled back defiantly. A second later, he was at it again, jumping into the shaft and leaping clean off the walls.

This time, the Spartan made it all the way to the sixth floor before the agonizing pain caused him to make a misstep. As he reached his foot back to brace it against the wall behind him, he pushed too hard, and launched prematurely, sending his head flying forward into the wall in front of him.

"Sh-" He started, but was cut off as he tipped back over and smacked his head against another wall. He was freefalling now with Victoria still on his back. Six floors he'd climbed, and now he was going back down again. Painfully aware of the agony he was about to get to know very well, he turned his body so that he was facing the floor as it came rushing up to meet him in his vision.

CRASH!

He hit flat on the floor, knocking the wind from his lungs and cracking a dozen of his reconstructed bones. He gasped, spitting blood up into his helmet.

"Son of-" He coughed again, spilling more of his blood onto his visor. He managed a glance up the shaft. At that moment, his fate began to set in. There was nothing he could do.

He was going to die.

"Damn it," he said, feeling his conscious mind start to cave as blackness ate away at the edges of his vision. He felt the weight on his back shift slightly as Victoria's limp body began to slide off.

\_No,\_ he thought, \_I can't. Magnusâ€|my wordâ€|I gave him my word.\_ He cursed again and began to sit up.

"Ezekiel, that's enough!" Demon's voice echoed in his mind again. "Just quit. It's not worth this."

"Shut up," he snapped, starting to stand. His visor was stained red, either because of the four "WARNING" signs blinking on all sides, or because of the blood he'd coughed onto it. Ezekiel didn't care which.



He checked the time.

\_Four more minutes,\_ he thought, \_I can't quit yet.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel, for the first time in quite a while, not only had little idea of how to get the Spartans out of their current mess, but also found himself struggling simply to keep up with all that was going on. Somewhere in the last thirty seconds, a dozen Brute Choppers had been released from their Phantom-carriers and had charged the Spartans en masse.<p>

Even so, apart from Landon's situation, the fight was going surprisingly well. Blaine was smacking Choppers left and right with his hammer, tossing them around as if they were nothing but oversized toys.

Jason was doing fine: he was more than content to use his cybernetic legs to jump clean over any Chopper-driving Brutes foolish enough to try and ram him. Once he was over them, the gold-armored Spartan would bring his Beam Rifle to bear and take aim.

The Covenant never knew what hit them.

Stephanie, on the other hand, had had just a little bit of trouble when things first started. Carrying only small arms, she was forced to do nothing but dodge the incoming crafts when they set their sights on her.

That is, until she discovered the two Choppers that Jason had sniped the drivers clean off of. The first thing she did was to grip one of them by its thin back and swing it around behind her like an oversized baseball bat. The Brute that had been boosting toward her was met with the front end of the other Chopper, and both vehicles detonated.

A few seconds later, Stephanie was walking out of the smoke with a pair of giant wheels.

The moment another Chopper came toward her, the cybernetic Spartan turned the wheel in her left hand into the Frisbee from Hell. One second, it was soaring, whistling and cutting through the air. The next, it had impacted with the front end of the Chopper and lodged itself deep into the craft's engine and inner-wheels.

As the Brute piloting the craft moved and started to turn the vehicle away from Stephanie, she threw the second wheel. The Covenant soldier didn't even have time to blink before its chest was crushed from the side and the wheel's edge was driven through its armor, tissue, and bone.

Samuel felt a shadow of a smile crawl across his face as he watched her get onto the remaining empty Chopper and begin riding around, boosting into any unsuspecting aliens and shredding both them and their crafts.

He couldn't believe it. Somehow, even with Landon completely immobile and missing two of their teammates, the Spartans were functioning as well as ever, and the Brutes couldn't touch them. As long as they

kept charging individual Spartans and trying one-at-a-time to crush them, this battle would be over without any major problems.

"I hate these damned things!" Landon's cry tore Samuel from his thoughts. Somehow, things always found a way to go any way but the way he needed them to in order to fight effectively.

This time, the "wrong way" had been characterized by Landon being rammed by one Chopper, run clean over by another, and then being rendered completely immobile, but still able to yell and curse. Although, for once, Samuel could understand his yelling, as he was stuck out in the middle of the parking lot armed only with a Shotgun.

The brown-armored Spartan scowled, glancing at the time in the corner of his HUD as another Chopper turned to come his way. \_Five minutes,\_ he thought as he pulled a Plasma Grenade from its place on his armor. The Chopper began to close in on him, but Samuel only smiled. If he had one advantage over his fellow soldiers in combat with the Choppers, it was his height. He could see right over the enormous engine of the Chopper that normally served to hide its driver from sight.

Samuel pulled back and prepared to prime the grenade, but was caught off-guard when the Brute slowed down and began firing the Chopper's twin autocannons.

\_They're getting smarter,\_ he thought bitterly, holding his ground as the autocannons laid into his shields and the Chopper started to get closer. He waited, watching his enhanced shields as they began to dwindle and focusing on the Brute's ugly face until the alien was within his throwing range.

"Got you," he said, and reared back.

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine smiled as Samuel threw the Plasma Grenade in his hand like a baseball, arcing it right over the Chopper's massive engine and sticking its Brute driver right in its ugly mug.<p>

"Is that the best your so-called "army" can do?" Blaine yelled as another Phantom passed low overhead. While it was still above him, the right-hand-side unlatched, and two more Choppers spilled down into the parking lot.

The first vehicle hadn't even hit the ground before Blaine pulled the hammer back and swung it forward, crushing the Chopper and hitting it so hard that it wiped the second Covenant craft clean out of the air as it soared away. Finally, it hit the ground and rolled sideways until it fell off the edge of the plateau.

The white-armored Spartan let out a cold laugh and turned to check on Landon once more. He'd smacked two Choppers already that were foolish enough to charge his teammate while he was down.

And he had no qualms with smashing a few more.

"Blaine, watch yourself!" Samuel yelled, and Blaine turned around on an impulse.

At that second, a pair of Choppers charged at him at an "X" angle. He leapt out of the road just in time for them to come through, the one on the right first, and then the one from his left.

He scowled, turning to see three more zooming away from the Spartans and just starting to turn for another shot.

"Who are they coming for?" Stephanie asked, pulling up beside him in her own commandeered Chopper.

"I don't know," Blaine said, glancing back and forth as they all turned at once. At their current distance, it was still impossible to see their intended target. "I think it-"

"Guys!" a voice yelled from behind him. He turned to see Landon with his arm-shields up in the air and a Chopper rushing straight for him.

Stephanie took off and Blaine made a dead sprint for Landon's position. With only ten feet between the downed Spartan and the Chopper, he jumped over him and swung the hammer down, smashing the giant craft's engine. The Brute Captain driving the vehicle crawled from the wreckage and stood up, roaring.

"Go to Hell." Blaine said bitterly as he stabbed the Brute in the chest with the handle of the Gravity Hammer. Next he struck the beast's stomach, and it doubled-over. A second later, Blaine was on it, crushing its exposed neck with one squeeze of his biomechanical hand.

"Blaine, they're going for Landon!" Samuel's voice echoed in his head. Blaine made a full spin to see the last four Choppers coming at his teammate, who was holding his shields in front of him in a pointless attempt to divert the damage they'd do if they hit him.

Blaine took the closest incoming vehicle and smashed the ground in front of the Chopper at the last available second, sending it flipping over backwards. Unfortunately, it landed solidly on its front wheel and boosted again.

"Damn things," he snarled, "freakin' impossible to flip."

This time, however, he forgot all about flipping the Covenant craft. With the last ounce of power in the hammer's battery, he smashed the front engine and caved it in as he had done with so many others before it. The Chopper died and its driver leapt off, furious and holding a Brute Spiker.

"Oh come on," Blaine said disbelievingly, "you're not serious."

The Brute took a swing and Blaine let it carry through. It hit his shields, cut through, and put an inch-long scrape in his armor. Without flinching, he dropped the hammer and just looked straight at the Brute.

"Demon!" it yelled, taking another swing. This one cut another identical scrape into the left side of his breastplate. When he still didn't flinch, the Brute swung again, raising its hand up

and-

Blaine snatched it by the neck, holding the alien four inches off the ground. It tried to roar, to howl, but all that came out were gagged choking noises.

"I've said it once; I'll say it again: getâ€|theâ€|Hellâ€|offâ€|myâ€|planet!" He punctuated the sentence by spinning around and throwing the Brute as hard as he could toward the edge of the parking lot that was also the edge of the plateau the structure had been built upon. The Brute soared for more over thirty feet and flew clean over the edge without ever touching the ground.

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel braced himself as the Chopper he'd designated as "his" charged forward. The giant Spartan was standing directly between the alien craft and his fallen teammate, but he was out of grenades, and no number of Shotgun shells was going to stop the Brute vehicle.<p>

Blaine had dealt with one Chopper already, and Jason had used the last of his Beam Rifle's charge to deal with another. Stephanie had rammed the third with her own Chopper, but she was on Landon's opposite side now, and there was no way she could make it around in time to stop the last of the Brutes.

Samuel scowled as he stared down the oncoming alien. It was his turn. He had to stop it, but had no idea how. He glanced at the time.

\_Just another minute,\_ he thought, knowing with a slight bit of comfort that the time remaining until extraction was closer to thirty-seconds.

Still, that wasn't soon enough for Landon.

He risked a look backwards. Neither Blaine nor Jason were close enough to Landon to grab him and get him out of harm's way. Stephanie was on the other Chopper and much too far.

Samuel braced himself as the Brute charged forward, boosting. The Chopper was now less than twenty yards away.

\_I don't know if I can do this,\_ he prayed,\_ but even if I can't do it, give me the strength to get it away from Landon. I've already lost two Spartans today. I can't lose another. Please.\_

With that, he bent his knees his hands out in front of him, focusing hard on the Chopper's sharp edges. If his plan was to work, he was going to have to get a perfect grip. Otherwise, he and Landon would both be shredded.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the Chopper boosted across the lot and Samuel's hands met its front. The impact alone sent shockwaves up and down the giant Spartan's body and caused his left leg to give for a second as he skidded backwards. His boots grinded against the ground until it finally cracked and his brace-foot dug several inches into it.

His hands were lodged just above the curved spikes on the front of the Chopper, exactly where he'd wanted them. Still, the sharp metal had scraped clean through his shields and his armor, and he could see dark, red blood dripping down from both his hands. Groaning, he pushed his arms forward and extended them fully.

The Brute driving the craft was stunned, growling, but completely shocked.

Taking a deep breath, Samuel braced his arms and held them outstretched as he slowly tilted the Chopper slightly to the right. The Brute, knowing it was about to be tipped, angled its body to the left in an effort to balance the vehicle.

Samuel smiled. Before the alien even knew what was happening, he switched which way he was tilting the vehicle and put all he had into flipping it to the left. Its one wheel came loose from the ground and the Chopper rolled four full times before coming to rest.

At that second, another dozen Phantoms made themselves visible on the horizon, and a dozen more were already at the edges of the lot, dropping off another contingent of Brute Choppers. Samuel checked the time.

\_It's time to go,\_ he thought eagerly, \_where's our extraction?\_

Suddenly, something glistened only a few feet away and got his attention. Squinting, the Spartan noticed that something was bending the sunlight and tilting it and-

It was big.

"Demon," a familiar voice said. Suddenly, the cloaked Phantom's side-latch opened and Samuel saw the Field Master inside. "I told you I would call for your extraction."

Samuel smiled, shaking his head in disbelief. "Thank you." He said enthusiastically. The Spartan turned to the rest of the team. "Get Landon and let's go!" He yelled.

They didn't need to be told twice. Two seconds later, Blaine and Stephanie had Landon in their arms and were carrying him into the Phantom. Jason followed them, and Samuel quickly jumped in last.

"I was beginning to worry that we would be too late." Ahrmonro said.

"So were we." Blaine said with a laugh.

Samuel looked around. He saw the Field Master and two other Elites including the pilot, but none in silver armor. "Where is U'svere?"

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel felt his spine rattle as he crashed into the floor of the elevator shaft for a fourth time. He tried to stand, but it was a thirty-second endeavor.<p>

And he had less than three minutes remaining.

"Damn it all!" He yelled, furious. He just couldn't get to the eighth floor. Each and every time, his foot slippedâ€|no matter how hard he tried.

"Demon!" a voice echoed in the shaft around him. Recognizing the sound, the pitch-dark Spartan looked up.

"U'svere!" he yelled, for once truly glad to see the Sangheili. "What are you doing in this God-forsaken place?"

"Rescuing you, Demon," the alien answered. Without a pause, he pulled a small device from his armor that Zeke couldn't make out. A second later, he pressed a button and a rope of pure energy descended the length of the shaft, coming to rest at the Spartan's feet.

"What is this?"

"An Energy Tether, Demon," U'svere answered. "Now hurry! Tie it to your teammate and I shall pull her up."

Ezekiel did as he was told and tied the rope around Victoria, then watched as she was pulled up by the SpecOps soldier. After twenty seconds, she disappeared, and then the rope was thrown back down.

"Can you climb?"

"Of course I can!" Zeke snapped, taking hold of the rope and starting to ascend. He checked the time as he did and saw that they had just under two minutes remaining.

"Hurry, Demon!" The Sangheili shouted. Ezekiel scowled.

"I am!" He said. "Just go without me. I'll catch up!"

"I will not." U'svere said sternly. "I came back for the two of you, and I will not leave with anything less."

After forty seconds of painful climbing, Ezekiel reached the eighth floor and reached his right hand up to the edge of the doorway, gripping it and starting to pull himself up. Suddenly, he felt his right arm give out completely and it began to slide.

"Oh," he said, "oh shit. Hey! U'sve-"

The alien's clawed hand gripped his wrist and pulled him the rest of the way onto the floor.

"You could've waited until I actually fell," Ezekiel joked with a smirk. "It would've been more dramatic."

"I considered it." The Elite said coolly.

Zeke grinned and glanced behind the Sangheili, and then stopped cold.

"What the Hell! You have to be kidding me!"

"What?" Victoria asked as she brushed herself off.

"You wake up now? Now? Why the Hell couldn't you have woken up two minutes ago?"

"You may fight later, Demons." U'svere said. "Right now, we must go. There is an exit on this floor, but-"

"It's not an exit!" Victoria said. "It's a place for shipments to be dropped off. It's nothing but a door on the side of the plateau! We'll go right into the ocean!"

"It's better than staying here with the nukes." Ezekiel scowled.  
"Lead the way."

U'svere nodded and took off through the complex. Victoria followed almost effortlessly, but Zeke had to grit his teeth and push himself just to keep up. He glanced at the time, which now read around forty seconds.

"It's this way!" The Sangheili shouted as they ran through a doorway into another room. "That's it!" He pointed to a large, sliding steel door at the end of the room.

"I've got it." Victoria said, dashing in front of him and gripping one side of the door. In three seconds, she had it pulled open wide. Ezekiel could see nothing but bright blue sky on the other side.

"What now?" Zeke said, suddenly wondering how well he'd swim with one leg and one arm.

The SpecOps Commander clicked his mandibles. "You have to trust me, Demon." He said proudly, and ran for the door. Victoria shrugged and followed, and Zeke did the same.

He leapt out into the open air and was stunned by how bright the sun was shining. Below him, he could see nothing but ocean and rocks. He started to fall and glanced around. Victoria was glancing back and forth nervously, but the Elite was perfectly calm.

"How are you so damned ca-"

SMACK!

Ezekiel fell onto an invisible floor and worked to pry himself from it. Feeling around, he could tell that whatever he was on was smooth and rounded at the top.

Suddenly, the invisible floor shimmered and revealed its true colors: green and grey. A second later, the full Separatist Phantom was in plain view.

From the side, Ezekiel heard Samuel's voice. "Are you guys coming in, or what?"

\* \* \*

><p>"I can't believe we made it." Victoria said as she sat down in a corner of the ship. Ahrmonro made the equivalent of a human smile,

clicking his mandibles, and turned to Samuel.<p>

"I do not wish you to believe that the Sangheili are in the habit of abandoning their allies when a situation gets to its lowest point." The Field Master said. "I did have a plan of action, and I would not have left if U'svere had not volunteered to stay behind."

The Spartan nodded. "I understand, Field Master." He said. "No apology is necessary." The human turned to U'svere. "You saved their lives. Thank you."

"Yes, thank you!" Victoria said.

Ezekiel scoffed. "I owe you one, Commander." He nodded his head.

"That's the closest thing you'll ever get to a "thank you" from Ezekiel." Samuel said with a sigh.

The other one, Blaine, chipped in, "he's an ass."

"So," another of the Spartans, Jason, interrupted, "what now?"

"Now," the brown-armored leader said, "we go home." Suddenly, he did something that surprised Ahrmonro. "You wanna come with us?"

"Lunch is on me." Zeke said before the Elite could answer.

"Now that's a "thank you" if I've ever heard one!" Landon shouted. Ahrmonro turned to U'svere, who shrugged his shoulders, much like the humans did.

"I believe we have time for a stop." He said.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Well, that's the end of the Los Angeles segment! I hope everyone liked it as much as I enjoyed doing (most of) it, lol. Anyways, in the reviews for this chapter, I would appreciate it if you could give me an "overall" take on the L.A. segment. What you liked, maybe what you didn't care for so much. Maybe enemies you'd like to see more of. I don't know. It'll help me with the last segments. Thanks a lot!<strong>

\*\*Also, as a final note: I will be taking the next two weeks to get chapters for the next segment written. I may or may not post before that time, but, at the latest, the next one will be up by the 25th. I know, it's a ways off, and I hope not to need that much time, but starting a brand new segment is tough, and I've got some sweet stuff to introduce to you all that I need to make sure is flawless. So, if I get stuff up before then, great. If not, expect the first by that Friday, and then expect two chapters a week for a couple weeks after that while I use what I'll have worked on. Thanks again for your patience and for your reading and reviews!\*\*

\*\*P.S. - Just as an ending "teaser," the next segment will involve three major things:\*\*

\*\*(1) Space-Travel and a Covenant Armada



>(2) A Prophet<br>(3) The UNSC's ship that was alluded to in Chapter 32. "It's gonna be BIG!"\*\*

\*\*Anyways, adios everybody! Later!\*\*

\*\* - Raptor\*\*

### 38. Chapter 37: R&R

\*\*Author's Notes: Well, here it is: the start to the next segment. It's well underway, though admittedly not as far as I'd like it to be (you wouldn't believe the amount of research that goes into...well, something to be mentioned in the next chapter or two). Still, I think I'll be just fine to stick within the time constraints I try to set...anyways, reviews!\*\*

\*\*First, however, it's important that I give everyone a general timeline as to when things in the Halo 3 game go on in relation to everything in this story. Also, please note that this timeline was done a while ago and I don't have a truly accurate one to go by, so if anyone has a better timeline for the following events (a reliable one) PLEASE send it to me. If I get a reliable one, I will replace the dates in this chapter and the ones leading up to it. Nothing will change, in regards to time in-between fights or the time of day...I'll simply bump dates back to coincide. Thanks all!\*\*

#### \*\*TIMELINE:

>Jan. 22: Ark Portal Mostly Uncovered<br>Jan. 28: Portal Activated By Truth, Flood Arrive  
>Jan. 2829: UNSC Follows through the Portal\*\*

\*\*These dates, from what I've gathered, are somewhat far in the future, with the 2nd Battle of Earth occuring as early as late November in 2552...but I can't find a truly reliable timeline to guarantee it for me. If someone can get me one, I would very much appreciate it. Thank you!\*\*

#### \*\*REVIEWS:\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: Hey! I'm glad the last segment was as big a hit as ended up. Really, I didn't know if I could make it all work...but I guess, somehow, I stumbled through until it came out right! lol. As for it all being fun to read...well, it really is a good time to think up too, most of the time. ;) \*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Thanks for your review! I'll tell you right off: I've been on FanFiction all of two times (for about a minute each) in the last two weeks, 'cause I've been so busy with Halopedia, the books (mostly Fall of Reach), and other Halo-sources, trying to get this next segment worked out. But, now that I've gotten a little spare time, I promise to check your story out as soon as I can! Thanks and sorry for the wait!\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: Wow, thanks very much! Honestly, I didn't think that the whole thing was THAT good, lol, but I won't argue with a happy reader! I plan on incorporating the Flood before the story ends, but I can't guarantee Sentinels. Sorry...they were just never my thing, lol. Anyways, thanks for all your compliments and I hope you like

this next segment!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: I'm glad you enjoyed the ending to the Los Angeles segment! I enjoyed writing Zeke's part (as I often do...), and I think, maybe, you meant Landon? He was the one who took the Chopper to the legs, lol. As for the whole segment, I'm glad it was a success. I will say that I began to recognize that there was too much repetative killing in the early chapters, and I promise to fix that from now on. I hope it ended better than it started, and that everyone enjoyed it as much as you let on that you did! Thanks again, and welcome to my official "Space" segment. :)\*\*

\*\*hellhound cerberus: Hey, sorry this one's late! My dumb dialup internet decided to be completely moronic TODAY, of all days. So, it's gonna go up right at the start of the 26th. So...sorry. Happy belated Birthday though! This one's nothing birthday-worthy (lol, sorry), but I think there are a couple chapters coming up that you'll love. Thanks very much for your review!\*\*

\*\*AosUnderSol: LOL. I love that. BA. haha. Zeke is stubborn, yeah...trust me, that's a defining trait! lol. And Blaine, well...he's a handful without a Gravity Hammer...give him one, and I wouldn't wish that fight on anyone! I will tell you, I won't do the "Infinite-Hammer" for this story (or at least this segment), but I am saving the idea and very seriously considering it for the sequel (you'll see why once I actually get it out there for everyone to read). Thanks!\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Dude! You've helped so much the last two weeks with the big surprise I've got in store for everyone! Thank you-thank you-thank you! lol. But, seriously, I'm happy that you liked the ending of the last one (since it was one of the first chapters in a long time you didn't proof for me, lol). Leaving U'svere behind just seemed like the perfect finish to me. Oh yeah, hehehe...keep that A+ ready, my friend. ;)\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: Hi! I'm impressed; your review said that you sat down to read the day before you posted, and then got all the way up to the present in 24 hours! That's really good (and says something for my writing, too), as there's almost 200,000 words to the whole thing (getting there). I've decided to take your advice and look for a situation or two where I can combine the Spartans' talents, so be on the lookout in the future! Also, Zeke's my favorite, lol. You have good taste, lol. Finally, in regards to my first chapters...lol, trust me, I know. I worked for 2,000 words for a LONG time before I changed the way I did things. I'm SO glad that I did! Hope you'll stick around to read more!\*\*

\*\*rimshooter: Thank you!\*\*

\*\*j3ssi3r0ck3r0n: Hey! First of all, to answer your question: I will be bringing his instincts back in once for certain, and maybe twice (I'm working on the technicalities of a later segment). Promise. Second, thank you very much for your several compliments on my writing! They really do make my day, coming from you and other readers who genuinely enjoy the story! Third: The part with U'svere returning, to me, was fitting, because I didn't think that it would in the behavior of the Sangheili to leave when the going gets tough. Although, I will tell you in perfect honesty: There were two versions of this chapter that I did. One was the one I posted, the other was a

different idea in which Ezekiel pushes again and again and eventually forces himself all the way up the shaft. I considered both, and decided that the first would be more fitting and closer to the truth (not that, in any version, Ezekiel would just give up, keel over and die). So, yeah...I understand. I wanted him a hero too, lol.  
;)\*\*

\*\*Thanks to everyone who reviewed, and I hope you all like this next chapter. It's a little character development, a little information, a little...R&R.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 37:<strong>

â€" \*\*R&R â€" \*\*

\*\*1400 Hours - January 29, 2553\*\*

\*\*Albuquerque Military Outpost: Albuquerque, New Mexico\*\*

"How're your legs treating ya?" Jason asked. Landon sat up slowly in his bunk, waiting on his biomechanical limbs to begin beeping and pulsating red in at the knees and ankles: a familiar sign that they were not yet fully functional. He moved his legs around slowly, waiting on a warning.

None came.

"Not too bad," he answered, standing up with a sarcastic smile on his face. "And look at this shit: I just stood up, and I'm not flailing around on the ground in agonizing pain."

"Always a plus," Jason said, and Landon saw him grin. Neither of them was wearing a helmet, as the Spartans hadn't needed them in almost four weeks. The last month had been strictly rest, recovering, and recuperation from the Los Angeles mission, and no one had been doing much of anything.

There really wasn't a whole lot to do at the Albuquerque Military Outpost. As Landon had noted, the entire area was nothing but dust and rocks. And, to make matters worse, he'd been unable even to walk since the incident outside the Research Station.

That is, until today.

"It's about damned time!" Landon said, carefully jumping up and down on his legs. The UNSC had sent some of their best doctors and technicians to work on the Spartan's limbs less than a day after Zulu Company returned from L.A. But, after four failed surgeries and a dozen mechanical alterations that had gone unsuccessful, the staff had simply assigned the Spartan to bed-rest until they could come up with a better solution. Finally, after over a week of doing nothing â€" literally nothing â€" Landon was called in for another surgery and then taken back to his bunk early in the morning.

Landon was having a hard time accepting the fact that he could move again. He'd actually wondered, for a while, if he would ever be able to walk or fight again.

"Well," Jason said, standing up, "since you can actually move for a change, why don't you come and get a bite to eat?" He grinned evilly, "that is, unless you've still got a hankering for that medical-mush they've been feeding you for the past month."

Landon shook his head. "That stuff was awful," he said. "Seriously, my dog wouldn't eat that."

Jason rolled his eyes. "You don't have a dog."

"No, but if I did, and my dog had a pet, even it wouldn't even eat that shit."

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel checked the time on his HUD. It was after 3:00 already. He should be outside sparring or training or " at the very least " eating. Instead, he was inside the medical building being examined for the twenty-fourth time since January 2nd.<p>

"And let's just take a look here," the nurse said, moving an X-ray machine over the part of his MJOLNIR suit that covered his ribcage. She stopped there, letting it hover over his stomach.

"Well?" Ezekiel asked bitterly. Two hours he'd been inside this building today, and that was more than enough.

"Don't get anxious," the nurse snapped back. "If you hadn't gone and broken nine of your bones and cracked a dozen more, I wouldn't have to do this. I have other things I could be doing too, you know."

Zeke scowled. This nurse was the epitome of aggravation for him, laughing at his pain or making snide comments about his broken bones. He'd been told that, for one reason or another, she wasn't particularly fond of Spartans as a whole. Really, though, he didn't want to hear it from the woman.

What he wanted was to ask the nurse to trade places with him next time he was falling sixty-feet down an elevator shaft with a half-ton Spartan on his back, or the next time a Hunter decided to see just how far into a titanium wall a Spartan could go without breaking into little pieces.

But he didn't.

"Just hurry up," the Spartan said. A few minutes later, the nurse stood up.

"There," she said, "you're done. Happy now?"

"Yes," he snapped back, "very." He stood up to leave.

"Be sure to check out with one of the doctors on your way out."

Ezekiel nodded with a wave of his hand over his shoulder. "Sure thing," he said dismissively, and then walked out of the building without a word to anyone.

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine stood silently, watching as one of his teammates sparred relentlessly with the SpecOps Elite, U'svere. Both the Sangheili and the indigo-clad Spartan he was waging war with had been given titanium models of the Covenant Energy Swords that they were both so fond of using. The "play-swords" weighed over a hundred pounds each, but both the soldiers wielded them like they were the real thing.<p>

Victoria had plenty of practice under her belt in using the Covenant blades, but U'svere had one up on her: he had practice using two.

That was the difference in this sparring match: the two soldiers were sparring with a sword in each hand, changing the dynamic entirely. Instead of having an essentially-useless left arm in a sword-battle, Victoria was now armed twice as well, and it showed. At times, she swung the blades so quickly that Blaine's eyes began to hurt trying to keep up.

And yet, U'svere was holding his own. More than that, he appeared to have the advantage. While Victoria was, without a doubt, faster than the SpecOps, he had experience on his side, and seemed to foresee every strike the Spartan could make before she had even thought about doing it.

\_If she could just get the hang of it,\_ Blaine thought as she swung again. The silver-armored Elite ducked low and thrust one of his blades forward, which Victoria met with the blade mounted to her left elbow. With her arm hooked to the Elite's blade, she spun a complete circle, knocking the alien off-balance.

"Got you!" she yelled, swinging horizontally with her left arm. At the last second, the Elite's left-hand-blade came up and caught the strike, denting the metal on both swords.

"You are getting better." U'svere said, backing a step away and lowering the two swords. "It is a shame your teammate refused to train in this manner."

Blaine scoffed. \_Of course Ezekiel refused,\_ he thought, \_if he hadn't, he'd have actually been accepting help from another, and we can't have that.\_ He paused, pondering another thought. \_And worse, he'd have been accepting help from an Elite.\_ Blaine knew all-too-well that Ezekiel would rather die than accept help from a Sangheili, or any race of the Covenant, for that matter.

"So why did he accept it at the Research Station?" Blaine asked aloud, knowing that no one would hear him, as he had terminated all connections for the moment. A second later, he realized why and grinned.

\_Victoria.\_ He smiled wider, rolling his eyes. \_The bastard kept his word.\_

"Hey Blaine!" the Spartan in front of him yelled, getting his attention. She motioned to the swords in her hands. "You want a turn?"

Blaine laughed loudly, unable to hold back a wide smile. "Are you crazy?" He asked. "I hate those things. Given the choice, give me rockets and a Gravity Hammer every time." He paused, trying to find an exception. Finally satisfied that he could find none, he added, "every time."

"That's funny," Ezekiel's voice echoed in his head. The white-armored Spartan sighed. Zeke continued, "because we were just thinking of petitioning the Covenant about those hammers."

Blaine rolled his eyes, turning to the smaller Spartan. When he did, he wasn't surprised to see that the black-armored soldier still had his helmet on, like always. "What are you carrying on about?"

Zeke laughed. "I was thinking of petitioning the Prophets. It'd be a message, sort of like this," Blaine heard him take a deep breath. "Dear Prophets: on behalf of Zulu Company and the human race, I would like to ask that you please stop the manufacturing of the Brute ceremonial weapon, the Gravity Hammer. The reason for this is that, after being made, they are sent to Earth in the hands of a Brute Chieftain, whom Blaine inevitably finds. He then tears the weapon from the alien's hands, beats the creature to death with it, and moves on." He paused, then added, "after which, no one on Earth, enemy or ally, is safe."

Blaine cracked his mechanical knuckles. "One of these days," he said with a smirk, "you're actually gonna piss me off. Then what do you think is gonna happen?"

Without missing a beat, the Spartan answered, "you'll probably chase after me, but without a ghost of a chance of actually catching me." Ezekiel shrugged, "after all, if you did catch me, you'd likely beat the Hell out of me."

Blaine couldn't help but smile. "Damn right." He said.

\* \* \*

><p>Stephanie flexed as much of her mechanical half as she could, as tightly as could, walking toward the exit of the medical building. She scanned the inside of her visor for warnings and alerts but, thankfully, found none. Samuel beat her to the exit, and held the door open for her patiently.<p>

"Thanks Sam," she said, hastening her pace in an effort to see that her commander didn't stand there for too long.

The brown-armored Spartan nodded, walking outside behind her without a word. Originally, Stephanie had thought that he had come to see that her alterations went off without a hitch, but, after seeing the marks on the armor on his hands, she knew better. He'd gone inside for his own specialized procedures.

Although, she had no doubt that he had stayed in the super-sterile environment longer than he needed to, only to be sure she was alright.

Samuel must've noticed that she was looking at his hands as they walked quickly toward the barracks. "They weren't big modifications," he said without slowing down. "All they did was put some

gravity-alteration technology on the top of each hand and additional support braces on my wrists."

Stephanie was puzzled. "Gravity-alteration?" she asked, "what for?"

The larger Spartan slowed a bit, bringing his fists up in front of his chest which, to Stephanie, meant above her head. "It's just for a little extra kick for close-combat." He said. "The researchers took the technology from the Brutes' Gravity Hammers, micro-sized it, and basically planted it on my knuckles."

"So no side-effects?" she asked. Stephanie had had more than her fair share of alterations, both mechanical and biological, and there were almost always side-effects.

"Not this time." Samuel answered cheerfully. "There was no invasive surgery or gene-altering procedure. They just put a small boost on the end of each hand and added braces to my wrists to compensate for the force of impact." He stopped walking suddenly and looked down at her. "What about yours?"

Stephanie flexed her arms again, almost subconsciously. "No problems here." She said. "All they did was add energy reserves to what was already there."

"So you and Blaine should be able to toss multiple Hunters now, eh?" Samuel said with a laugh. Stephanie nodded, grinning in her helmet.

"Yeah," she said. "If I have my way, we'll be tossing quite a few."

As they began walking again, a burst of static cut into her communication-link, and then was replaced by the Corporal's voice. "Spartans," he said, "I need all of you outside the Armory in fifteen minutes." A second later, the signal died.

"I guess we've got a chance of plans." Samuel said, changing course and walking south. "Let's go see what he wants."

\* \* \*

><p>"You should go." U'svere said and watched the Spartan in front of him freeze, lowering his two swords.<p>

"Look," he snapped, "while I will follow the Corporal's orders, I do not intend to follow them right now. As you heard, he said to be there in fifteen minutes. That means I've got fourteen-and-a-half minutes to do whatever the Hell I please." He paused, raising his arms and stretching his shoulders. "Now come on!"

The SpecOps Elite sighed, lifting the titanium blades and getting back into his fighting stance. The first Spartan, Victoria, had been rather enjoyable to spar with. This one, Ezekiel, was just, as the humans said, "a pain."

"Are you ready now?" The pitch-dark soldier asked.

The Sangheili nodded. "Yes."

Before he had even finished closing his mandibles, the Spartan's swords were cutting and piercing the air mere centimeters from the Elite's head. U'svere ducked low, bringing one of his blades up to parry the one in the Spartan's left hand as he swung the other one at the human's legs.

There was a whistling noise as the Sangheili's blade cut through empty air and the Spartan leapt clean over his head, flipping once and landing solidly on the ground behind him. U'svere turned around quickly, ready for the strike.

But the Spartan was just looking at him, waiting.

"Why did you not strike me, Demon?" U'svere asked, puzzled and more than a little irritated with the Spartan's games.

"How were you to know that I could do that?" He answered quickly. Then he shook his head. "Don't expect the same courtesy twice."

At this, the Elite growled bitterly. Not only was the Spartan arrogant, but he was attempting to make a mockery of the Sangheili's sword-fighting abilities. He was holding back, as if the Special Operations Commander wasn't worthy of his full attention.

U'svere would make him regret that.

"I do not need your 'courtesy,' Demon," he said, his tone lined with bitterness.

The Spartan shrugged. "Fair enough," he answered.

A split-second later, the air was crying again with the sounds of the four blades slicing around them. U'svere realized quickly that, while this Spartan's speed far from rivaled that of the female's, he had a great deal more experience with the Covenant Energy Swords.

But it was a far cry from the experience U'svere had.

The Spartan swung the sword in his left hand straight for the Elite's head, but caught only empty air. One second later, with his right-handed weapon, he stabbed at the Sangheili's stomach—only to miss once again.

"Not bad, split-lip." Ezekiel snapped as he drew back into another stance. U'svere clicked his mandibles loudly.

"You know, I have noticed several things about your team during my time here." The SpecOps said, ignoring the joke.

"Oh yeah?" the Spartan asked, lunging forward with a series of quick — but halfhearted — strikes. "Like what?"

The Elite dodged effortlessly to the side, bringing both blades up in an "X" arrangement and blocking both of the human's swords, which were coming straight down toward his head. "Your friend," he said, "Blaine. He's very quick to anger, but never seems to have a problem controlling it."

The Spartan laughed as he pressed down on the two swords U'svere was



holding, flipping into the air and landing behind him. The Elite ducked and felt the wind from a side-strike against the top of his neck. "That all?" the human asked. "You realized that Blaine's got a temper? Wow. You're awfully observant." His tone was laced with sarcasm.

"The female, Victoria," the Sangheili said, drawing back. "She is faster than you are." At this, Ezekiel lashed out with both swords, narrowly missing the Elite's chest. "But she doesn't suppress her emotional responses quite as much as you do."

The Spartan stopped for a split-second.

"Perhaps it is for that reason that she is a stronger warrior than you?" U'svere asked, his voice full of sympathy.

"She's no better than I am!" Ezekiel growled, leaping into the air and coming down hard on the Elite. He swung the swords and even tried the occasional assault with the two blades mounted to his elbows, albeit while their plasma-coating-technology was deactivated. "Come on, lizard-lips!" He said after U'svere nimbly dodged a series of strikes. "You gonna dance, or fight?"

At this, the Commander jumped back, raising his swords. He had one final comment. "And you," he said coldly, "I've noticed that, when you realize that your skills are not great enough to win a battle, you resort to your sharp tongue." He paused as the Spartan tensed. "When you know that you are not strong enough â€" not good enough â€" to defeat your opponent, your new tactic is to irritate them and destroy their focus on the fight." U'svere clicked his mandibles, laughing. "But I've seen more battles than you can imagine, fought and slaughtered more enemies than you'll ever know. Your 'wit' means nothing to me."

To his surprise, Ezekiel only laughed. It wasn't a real laugh, of course, but a cold, forced snicker accompanied by, he could only imagine, an equally-cold sneer. "Not bad, Sangheili," he said, carefully pronouncing the name of the race. "But even you, in your vast experience, have overlooked something."

"And what is that?" U'svere asked, genuinely curious. The Spartan, for once, was being neither condescending nor insulting. He was speaking clearly and calmly.

"I never believe defeat is inevitable." He shrugged. "I've forgotten how to lose." Ezekiel brought the swords to his chest as he lowered into a fighting stance. "It's been too long."

U'svere smiled. "Allow me to refresh your memory, then."

\* \* \*

><p>Charles checked his watch as the seven soldiers standing in the sand in front of him waiting in perfect silence. They were some of the greatest soldiers ever to take up arms against the Covenant. They had worked together to nearly clear the city of Los Angeles of aliens. Somehow, they had even managed to work together flawlessly, despite their differences.<p>

In front of him, stood six Spartans and a single Sangheili â€" the

Field Master "Ahrmonro.

\_Where the Hell is Ezekiel?\_ He wondered. Honestly, though, the Spartan still had nearly forty-seconds, so Charles really didn't expect him to show up for another thirty, at least.

Still, he couldn't wait to share the news with the Spartans. It was fresh from HIGHCOM, and just what the doctor ordered to stir up some real morale among the troops.

Well, most of it.

There had been the incident in Africa, but the Elites had come and helped them with that. Glassing an eighth of the continent might have been overkill, but at least they were rid of the Flood, and that was what mattered.

"Sir," Ezekiel said quickly, acknowledging the Corporal as he dashed by him, running fast enough to churn up the dust like a small sandstorm. Charles heard footsteps behind him and watched as the other Elite at the outpost, U'svere, ran by as well, nodding his acknowledgement to the Corporal respectfully before taking his place in the line of soldiers.

Charles checked his watch. \_Sure enough,\_ he thought, \_eight seconds left. \_He sighed. \_That's Ezekiel.\_ In all fairness, however, Landon had arrived less than a full minute before. Zeke wasn't the only Spartan with an affinity for pushing the clock.

The Corporal sighed. Zulu Company had proven stronger, faster, and better than HIGHCOM had ever dreamed they would be. Every threat the Covenant could toss on Earth was made a mockery of in face of the seven Spartans.

And yet, through it all, they'd managed to keep what was "to him" the most important trait of all: their humanity. He'd seen so many Spartans before that, while insanely efficient, were all but machines. Their personalities showed through on rare, once-in-a-blue-moon-type occasions.

Not Zulu Company. These were the Spartans that people could trust, even relate to on occasion. Granted, they had their eccentricities, but it was impossible to hold that against them knowing the lives they'd been forced into.

Charles smiled. These were his Spartans, his team.

"I've got good news for you all." He said loudly, getting immediate, undivided attention.

"The Covies are back in L.A.?" Landon asked hopefully. Coming from another team or perhaps being directed at another officer, the question would've been deemed "out-of-line," but the Corporal only laughed.

"Not quite, Landon. Sorry." He said, and then cleared his throat. "My news comes straight from HIGHCOM, and it concerns Africa, specifically near New Mombassa and Voi."

"The Covies are back in New Mombassa?" Landon asked again, this time

with only a glimmer of hope. Charles laughed again. He was in too good a mood to be put off by the Spartan's hopeful comments.

"They were." The officer answered, "but not anymore. Actually, the first news I have to bring you is that the Covenant, unfortunately, were successful in their search for whatever it was they wanted from the Earth. Less than twenty-four hours ago, a portal opened above the African continent, and all the Covenant ships â€" including the Dreadnaught â€" disappeared into it."

He paused, taking a breath as the Spartans waited eagerly for the rest of the news to be told to them. "Soon after," he said, "the UNSC, together with the Sangheili, followed the Covenant Loyalists through the portal. Among these brave soldiers was none other than Spartan-117, the Master Chief."

"Yeah!" Landon yelled, apparently unconcerned with restraining himself. "I'd say that means we might just have a chance at winning this war after all!"

Charles' smile faded slightly. "I'm afraid that's not all the news." He said. "Before the UNSC and Sangheili followed suit, a ruined CCS-Battlecruiser slipped into the atmosphere and crashed in the ruins of the city."

At this, a few of the Spartans' bodies snapped even more rigid than they had been before, listening at complete attention.

"At first, we believed the ship to have Covenant reinforcements, but it was quickly revealed that the Battlecruiser was infested with the parasite we've come to know as the Flood. It quickly began to spread and infect the surrounding area, until the Elites and their Carrier, the \_Shadow of Intent\_, were forced to glass the entire region."

They were quiet for several moments, until Samuel slowly, carefully broke the silence. "Have the Flood been completely eradicated?" He asked. "I mean, are we one-hundred-percent certain that there were no surviving spores?"

Charles nodded. "We're certain, Sam." He said. "The Sangheili glassed, as Admiral Hood so eloquently put it, 'half a continent.' And, while they were nowhere near that destructive, they did very efficiently rest our worries about the parasite."

The Spartan nodded slowly. "Good."

"However," the Corporal said, preparing his final bit of news, "we've also been given word that the Covenant's former home-planet, High Charity, is on its way to Earth. It too is dominated by the Flood."

Blaine was the first of the Spartans to react. "Sir," he said, "we can't fight off an infection that spans all of High Charity, especially if the majority of our ships are in combat on the other side of the portal."

Charles drew a deep breath before answering. He had to word his next sentence carefully. On one side, he could give the team a false sense of security. On the other, he could very easily instill a lot of

unnecessary anxiety. "Intelligence has gathered that, while they're not certain, it is likely that the Flood will proceed past our planet, straight through the portal Truth was kind enough to open. They're not sure, but the spooks at ONI think that the CCS-Battlecruiser was actually shooting for that same portal, and was just less-than-accurate."

"So, we may not have to deal with the Flood after all?"

"Well," he answered, "I for one am certain that the Flood won't pass up a perfectly good planet to invade." He paused, the calm, easy-going features on his face melting into the cold, austere image of an officer. "If I hear one peep from ONI that the Flood so much as flinch in our direction, you all had better be ready to ship out immediately."

"Yes sir!"

Charles relaxed, letting the smile crawl back across his face. There was no reason yet to be solemn. Earth, for now, was being given a reprieve from the constant threat of attack—even if it was a short one.

"That being said," he continued, "I agree with Landon. We might actually have a shot at winning this war after all. Up 'til now, I never really considered it," he admitted sadly. "The war on land we could always win, especially once the Spartan programs took off. But the war in space showed us only countless defeats." He looked to the Field Master, Ahrmonro, and the SpecOps Commander, U'svere. "But now, with the tactical and technological abilities of the Sangheili covering our backs, I think it's high-time those Prophets got a little payback!"

"Amen to that!" Jason yelled. As expected, a few of the Spartans began to exchange words and Charles even caught a glimpse of a lightning-fast high-five. He smiled to himself.

\_They're more than Spartans,\_ he thought as he watched them laugh and fool around, not like machines, but like the people he'd come to know so well. \_They're Zulu Company.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: So, that's it! Nothing spectacular, but (I hope) the start to a SPECTACULAR segment. I've worked a lot of extra hours on this upcoming set of chapters, and Samson00 has been there for me the whole way, putting his college-level Physics to good use! ;) Give me a few chapters, and I'll show you the very beginning what will hopefully be one of the greatest (and rarest) victories in UNSC history!<strong>

## 39. Chapter 38: New Problems

\*\*Author's Notes: Okay...here's Chapter 38. I'll tell you all ahead of time: it's short, it's more info-stuff and some general bickering by Zulu Company. First, however, Reviews!\*\*

\*\*REVIEWS:\*\*

**\*\*Rimshooter:** Well, a little short...you won't like the length of this one either, but I promise, it'll pick up in a chapter or two. Hope you like it, regardless. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*armoured-blade:** Yeah, lol, this segment takes a little more intro than the L.A. one did...so I'll be at for a chapter or two. As for the Corporal and U'svere...well, the former has always been fond of them, as I've tried to pretty much openly disclose. The latter...he really doesn't have anything against the Spartans, or Zeke individually, lol. He just felt like pushing his buttons. In regards to the Master Chief: if I had a way to let them see him in action in the last half of Halo 3, I would...but they're gonna be pretty busy up ahead. I've been thinking of having them view a video or something showing him, perhaps during "The Storm" or "Floodgate," but it seems improbable. Either way, we'll see. Oh, and the timeline: thank Samson00. The dates, I'm sure, aren't PERFECT, lol, but I'll fix them if ever I get a Bungie-sponsored timeline. ;)\*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** Si. Very eager on patriotism, lol. ;) What can I say? It's a full-fledged habit. Thanks for the compliments on the chapter...the one thing you mentioned, about my saying that they were going to have a victory...lol, I think it was taken wrongly. That's entirely my fault, as how I wrote it implied something different, but I was really just giving a sneak-peek to the absolute end of the story (saying that "hopefully" the UNSC will have one of its greatest victories, which would be against the Covenant)...which, as I said, follows H3, so everyone kinda knows that, in the end, Earth is gonna survive. The catch, I think, is...at what cost? Anyways, minor stuff, and my bad. I'm also thinking about what you said at the end, about losing a battle, for a change. So...thanks for all your input! Hope you like what's to come.\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey, thanks for your compliment! Also, I completely forgot to send you a PM about your story...in case you don't read this, I'll be sending you one before the evening's up. My word. Thanks, and my apologies if you thought I ignored you or something, lol.\*\*

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** lol, and you're right: this is just the start. This promises (I hope) to be my best segment yet...beaten, perhaps, by only the very last.\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Thanks for your compliments! And yes, Zeke is amazing. ;) But, seriously, in regards to this "following Halo 3" more...well, I don't know. Really, none of this story was meant to contradict H3...just focus on a different area than where the Master Chief was at the time. So, I guess, in answer to your question: no, this won't take place on the Ark or on the re-created Halo ring that was destroyed in Halo: CE. This will take place on and around the planet Earth as the war continues in our own backyard. And, if I have my way, I'll be posting a little faster soon...you have no idea how hard it was to figure out this chapter and the technicalities from the next couple...I can't tell you anything more, for fear of ruining the surprise, but I promise: it'll be worth the wait.\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Hey! Glad you liked the start to this segment. And yes, the Spartans and the Sangheili are getting along...for the most part. ;) In answer to your question: I don't know yet if they will play a

major role in this next segment. I'd tell you it's a surprise...but I'd be lying. I just haven't decided. I have scenarios played out both ways so, if anyone has a preference, they are welcome to let me know (which, in case anyone does and doesn't read other peoples' reviews, I will put in bold at the bottom of the chapter). Anyways, I'm glad SOMEONE liked the fight scene, lol. I was happy with it. Finally, in regards to your question about Magnus (the oh-so-common question, lol): I will tell you that he will return soon and be mentioned sooner. That's all I can give for right now.  
:)\*\*\*

\*\*TheHuntedOne: Oh, look who it is. ;) lol. I knew it...I swear I did (to anyone reading...inside joke). Anyways, yeah...they're just getting some well-deserved recoup from the warzone that is Los Angeles. As for your Prototype FanFic...well, we've talked, lol. Anymore you get typed, let me know! :)\*\*\*

\*\*j3ssi3r0ck3r0n: Hey, I'm a Zeke fan too...but, you know, he didn't really give it a second thought. As far as he's concerned, who cares what the shiny-armored split-lip has to say anyway, right? ;) No, but honestly, they're just pushing each other's buttons. Thanks for your review, and I hope you like what's up ahead!\*\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hola! lol. Thanks for the compliments! I wonder sometimes if I deserve them...lol. And no worries about the A+...you know partially what's coming, and we didn't do research for HOURS just for me to screw it up. Promise. As for Simon...yeah, well...I don't see you in that role, lol. ;)\*\*\*

\*\*Lecter42: Hey! Glad you liked this one! With what you said about the sparring between Zeke and U'svere...well, yes, that will be used later. Maybe not that exact situation, but something similar. Don't forget, I'm gonna have other "downtime" chapters to keep remotely interesting. ;) And yes, I will have a blast kicking some Prophet-tail. Thanks again!\*\*\*

\*\*AosUnderSol: LOL! Sweet, huh? haha. But yeah, Sam's got a little extra "umph" behind his punches, and Blaine and Stephanie now have a reusable energy-source to power their Herculean strength. This doesn't necessarily mean that they'll be stronger...just that they can do it more than once. Hope you like the upcoming chapter!\*\*\*

\*\*0756: Hi! First of all, let me say that yours is one of the largest reviews I've gotten and I appreciate the time you took to do it! Also...honestly, I appreciate the time you took to read the whole thing, lol. Now, having said that, thanks very much for your compliments on my writing. Personally, I shoot for "great" and tend to critique my own work as "average." Then again, so does my English Lit. teacher... ;)\*\*\*

\*\*In regards to your first comment, the one about the personalities of Zulu Company: I have to say that, if nothing else, it's ironic. Really, I don't get the credit for these characters. Of the seven Spartans that are fighting right now, four of them were, from start to finish, based on personalities I'm familiar with. Two of the others sparingly share traits with other personalities I'm familiar with. But, I do appreciate the compliments, and I'm glad that they settled into the Halo universe as well as they did. Although, I must say, the irony of your comments, about them being put into "our

time," is incredible. Honestly, they are in our time. A couple of them review this story regularly, in fact, lol.\*\*

\*\*The flow that you mentioned...I'm trying, lol. I think the "downtime" chapters (as I've grown fond of calling them) are the hardest for me, because I worry that I bore my readers into a coma (although, it doesn't help that proofreading bores me to a coma, lol). But it's nice to know that it's appreciated by the readers and not disliked.\*\*

\*\*Finally, the grammar...again, I try. I will occasionally miss things, as these chapters are - at the very least - 3,000 words. Usually far more. If I do slip, however, I will never take offense at having a grammatical error pointed out to me, and would very much appreciate it if someone would do that. Any that you have seen that I haven't corrected, please feel free to let me know. Oh, and on a last note: I hate spell-check...half the time. The other half, it's wonderful and ever-so-helpful. But...sometimes...I could just wing my computer out a window, if you can empathize with that.\*\*

\*\*And, in answer to your question: I realize that Magnus has been gone for a long time. The fact is, when I first removed him, I had a very set point at which I was going to bring him back...but I never dreamed that I'd have 20 chapters between his abduction (for lack of a better word) and his return. The story just got longer than I anticipated. But, as I told Taylor114: he will return soon, and he will be mentioned sooner. This segment will not hit its peak without Magnus back in the ring, you have my word. So, thanks for your review, and I hope that you'll stick around!\*\*

\*\*Now, with that taken care of, Chapter 38!\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 38:<strong>

â€" \*\*New Problems â€" \*\*

\*\*1700 Hours - January 31, 2553\*\*

\*\*Albuquerque Military Outpost - Albuquerque, New Mexico\*\*

Jason heard the door to the barracks burst open and the sound of footsteps as one of the Spartans rushed inside. His voice was loud and, as usual, obnoxious. "I trust you're out of excuses, finally?" he yelled.

Jason sighed. \_Here we go again.\_

"Not right now." A female voice answered, annoyed. "I'm tired. You're gonna have to wait."

"Come on!" The fully-armored Spartan shouted back. "I think I've waited long enough, thank you!"

"I told you," the other answered impatiently, her voice dripping with malice that hinted for opposite soldier to back off. "Not right now."

"Coward," Zeke spat.

"Enough!" Blaine said suddenly, sitting up in the set of bunks opposite Jason's. "If I hear one more word from the two of you, I swear, I'm getting the hammer out and I'm kicking somebody's ass."

"You will not." Samuel interjected calmly. "But he's right: that's enough." The taller Spartan sat up, glaring at the only armored Spartan in the room. "You'll have your rematch. I have no doubt that Victoria will oblige, in time." He turned to the female Spartan. "And you! You need to learn to ignore him, like the rest of us."

Ezekiel scoffed loudly, and Jason cracked a smile. "Oh, get over it." He said. "You knew long before now."

"And what about you?" the other Spartan retorted. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in a little one-on-one sparring?"

"Not even worth my time." Jason answered with a smirk. If there was one thing he was good at â€" other than piloting vehicles â€" it was getting a rise out of the smart-allic-Spartan.

"Oh yeah? Well why don't you get off your-"

"Enough!" Blaine was in it again. "Dear God," he said, "I know now why we haven't seen a single alien in almost a month! It had nothing to do with our killing hundreds of them. They were just tired of listening to the two of you!"

And, ironically, it was at that moment that the loudspeakers in the corners of the room flickered to life. "Spartans," the Corporal's voice echoed throughout the room. The man's voice sounded to Jason as if it was coming from a corpse, rather than their normally-enthusiastic superior. "You are to report to the briefing area outside the Armory in ten minutes. Leave your armor; come in your formalwear. That's all."

They stood silent for several moments, each of the Spartans turning their heads to get nervous glances at the others. Finally, Blaine broke the excruciating silence. "What the Hell was that?"

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel slowed his pace once he was within sight of the Armory. When he'd left the barracks, he was at as close to a dead-sprint as he could get in his suit and tie. Even before he'd been enlisted to become a Spartan, Samuel had never been a big fan of formalwear. Now, however, he hated it. Plain and simple, he would rather be fighting in a cut-off and shorts than in the intolerable confines of his tailor-fitted suit.<p>

More so than that, he would've preferred his MJOLNIR armor.

As the uneven, desert ground that surrounded the Armory gave way to a flat, concrete parking lot that doubled as a briefing station on fair-weather days, Samuel saw that four of the other Spartans had already arrived and were standing in a semi-straight line.

The two that were missing, of course, were Blaine and Ezekiel.



Samuel sighed. They'd get there.

The next thing the giant Spartan noticed was a small circle of what he assumed to be officers, probably from the Office of Naval Intelligence, standing just outside the main entrance to the Armory, talking quietly. Risking only passing glances at the ONI spooks, Samuel took his place in the center of the line.

Immediately, he turned to Victoria and motioned subtly to the group of soldiers. "Are they ONI?"

She nodded slowly, her eyes fixed on the group. No doubt, Samuel thought, she had some suppressed feelings regarding the Office of Naval Intelligence and its various testing procedures. He couldn't say he blamed her.

When Sam noticed that the smaller Spartan was breathing slightly faster than normal, he put his hand on her shoulder. "They're not here for you." He said sternly. She looked at him for a moment.

"And if they are?" she asked.

"Then they're shit-outta-luck." Landon said from the other side of Samuel. The leader felt a grin cross his face when Victoria smiled and shook her head.

"What he said," he answered, still smiling.

"What's the big joke?" A male voice asked behind them. Samuel recognized Blaine's tone instantly.

"Nothin'," he answered. He turned to face him and-

He stopped.

"Blaine!" He said, eyeing the unarmored Spartan with the slightest hint of a glare in his eyes. "Why are you carrying your hammer?"

The giant Gravity Hammer was strapped to the Spartan's right shoulder and his left thigh outside his suit-jacket. "What?" He asked.

Before Samuel could answer, Ezekiel walked up from behind Blaine. The Spartan, even unarmored, had his eyes covered, though this time it was by a set of jet-black sunglasses, as opposed to his pitch-dark visor. And, of course, the suit was pitch-black as well, from shoe to tie.

More importantly, however, he too was armed. He had a strap around his shoulder and chest that was holding his Sniper Rifle to his back, and Samuel could make out the glint of a metal hilt inside his jacket in the right-hand pocket.

Samuel shook his head, dumbfounded. "Why-" he started, trying to find the words. "What are youâ€¦why didâ€¦" He paused, gathering his thoughts. "Why in the world are you carrying those?" He asked, motioning loosely to the weapons.

"We were told to be unarmored." Zeke said bluntly, "not unarmed."

"Yeah," Blaine interjected. He started to speak again, but looked down at Samuel's waist and stopped. "Hey!" He shouted. "What about you?"

Samuel sighed and shook his head as he delicately moved his jacket to cover up the pistol-grip that was sticking out of his slacks on the right side. He rolled his eyes. No use scolding them now, he thought.

"Spartans!" a man said loudly from the Armory. Instantly, the Spartans were in a perfect line, facing the officer at attention.

Corporal Charles stepped from inside the small circle of soldiers that Samuel had noticed earlier. "This is Cap-

He stopped when the man who had spoken raised his hand bitterly. Samuel's suspicions were instantly confirmed: these were soldiers from the Naval Intelligence Office, no doubt about it.

"Spartans," the man said again, stepping out of the group, "at ease." He waited for a few seconds before continuing. "I'm afraid I have bad news."

\* \* \*

><p>"While I'm sure you were made aware of the recent developments involving the Prophet of Truth, the Flood's invasion of Africa, and the Elites' actions to end the threat of the parasite, I'm sorry to say that we now have a new problem."<p>

Victoria listened intently, waiting on the ONI spook to continue. Only two days previous, the Spartans had been informed that humanity had a chance at winning the war after all. Now, with a soldier from the Office of Naval Intelligence standing less than fifteen feet from them, telling them of a "new problem," victory had never seemed so far away.

"Our sources have recently intercepted a Covenant transmission from deep space." He said. "There is a fleet of â€" we think â€" about twenty Covenant starships on their way to Earth. Now, I realize that, to you, given your knowledge of space-combat, this doesn't sound like much, but, at this point in time, it's quite possibly more than we can handle."

Victoria cocked her head, visibly puzzled. Twenty ships would be a walk in the park for the orbital MACs stationed around the Earth. Combine that with the planet's military presence, and Hell, it wasn't even a fair fight. This was their home-world. It wasn't about to be taken by less than two dozen Covenant starships.

"What I mean," the man said, "is that the majority of our still-working vessels traveled through the portal as a sort of 'last resort' to help the Master Chief and stop Truth. We lost a lot of ships just in the past week with what we thought was the last contingent of Covenant starships."

"What about the orbital MAC Guns?" Jason asked, then promptly added, "sir."

"I'm getting to that." The soldier said. "We had around three-hundred Orbital Defense Platforms when the Covenant first located the Earth. During the first siege, we had a few losses due to the Covenant boarding parties, including the Malta and the Athens. Since then, the occasional small contingent of starships has entered the system, taken aim at the MAC Guns from more than 400,000 kilometers out, and then jumped system."

"What's a 'small' contingent, sir?" Landon asked, genuinely curious.

"Just a few small Frigates escorting one â€" maybe two â€" Covenant Destroyers, each one outfitted with a single Energy Projector." He paused. "They fire the damned things at us from almost 500,000 kilometers out, half the time. We don't even have time to arm a MAC round before they're in and out. Damned things have taken out over thirty of the stations in the past few months, easy."

"Shit," Blaine mumbled, his voice inaudible to anyone not equipped with the Spartans' advanced hearing.

"In addition," the operative said bleakly, "as you well-know, the Covenant have been all over Earth for a while now. They've been focused primarily on their artifact in Africa, but that hasn't stopped them from assaulting the power-plants that run the Orbital Defense Platforms."

"With all due respect, sir," Landon said, "we've heard very little about any major Covenant attacks outside those focused in Africa. I would have imagined that, if they were targeting the ODPs, we'd have been called in."

"You know how many power-plants used to run those three-hundred Orbital Defense Platforms, Spartan?" The man from ONI asked, putting a terrible emphasis on the last word, just as so many officers had done before him.

"No, sir," Landon said. Victoria could hear in the Spartan's voice that he was working hard to maintain his temper.

"Sixty of them," the man answered. "The average output for a power-plant runs five Orbital Defense Platforms. And do you know what these plants run on?"

"No."

"Solar power," he said, beaming with pride as if it had been his idea. "The power-plants run on solar power. Now, we can't have them shutting off at night, so where do you think we could place them to get the most sunlight?"

Victoria gulped. She knew where this was going.

"I'd say the equator," Landon said. "But what do I know? I'm just a Spartan."

"Very good," the spook answered in a tone used often when speaking to small children. A smile covered his face. "It turns out that many, many of our power-plants were right near the equator. In fact, forty

of them were on the African continent. See where I'm going with this?"

Landon nodded.

"With the vast majority of Africa ruined by a combination of the Covenant's landings, our battles with them, and then the glassing by the Elites here recently, that leaves less than two-dozen power-plants. Now, how many do you think the Covenant eliminated in their seemingly-random assaults on our major cities?"

No one answered.

"Seventeen!" he shouted. "We lost seventeen of the damned things! And the ones we're working to rebuild aren't ready yet and won't be ready for some time. Plain and simple: we're spreading ourselves too thin! We don't have the manpower to keep up with the constant attacks by the Covenant."

"Sir," Blaine said, "that still leaves three power-plants, correct?"

"Almost," the officer answered, recovering his composure. One of them has encountered a major malfunction that our technicians haven't been able to rectify, rendering it completely worthless. Another one just happened to power the \_Malta\_, the \_Athens\_, and the \_Cairo\_."

"Alright," Victoria said. She was tired of hearing about what had been totaled and damaged and assaulted. Only one thing really mattered at this point. "How many guns are there? How many are operational?"

"Seven," he answered. "We have seven operational guns, but, depending on where they strike, up to three of them may be unable to get a clear shot at anything. Ironically, the planet might get in the way."

"Funny," Zeke said sarcastically. "First you manufacture planet-killers on our home-planetâ€|now you're telling us that you put two-thirds of the power-generators of the planet's best hope of survival in a proximate area to each other." He scoffed, "genius."

\* \* \*

><p>"We had hoped to have the <em>Cairo<em> back up and running by the time another attack took place," the ONI operative said, "but it's coming too soon. Another ninety-six hours â€" four days â€" and we could've had it ready. But this fleetâ€|we expect it to be here in two."

"Two days?" Samuel asked.

The man nodded. "Two days."

"So, what do we do?" He asked. "I can't see you coming all the way out here to tell us that we're all gonna die."

"You're right, Spartan." The spook said. "I've come to offer you an invitation to join us when we intercept the incoming fleet."

Samuel was puzzled and more than a little disturbed by the offer. A Spartan in space was like a bird underwater—it just didn't work. "Why, sir?"

"Because we have reason to believe that a Prophet is aboard one of these ships," he said, "and we want you to go and get him."

"Wouldn't it be easier just to blast his ship into tiny pieces?" Zeke asked cynically. "Then you guys at ONI wouldn't even have to face the fact that a real battle was going on."

"Zeke!" Samuel snapped, "that's enough!"

He scoffed as the ONI officer tried to regain his composure. The man had a shocked look overcoming any other feature on his face.

"We want the Prophet," he started bitterly, "for a couple of reasons. One is that, if we can capture him, perhaps we can at least barter for time, which we desperately need. And, even if we can't, without a leader, the remaining Covenant will at least be forced to slow down."

"You hope." Landon said.

"Yes," he said. "We hope."

Samuel nodded. "Fine," he said. "We'll do it. But, how do you intend to even fight the twenty ships that are on their way? You said yourself that you don't have the firepower."

A wicked smile crossed the man's face. "I never said we didn't have the firepower." He said. "I just said that we were low on ships."

"Meaning?" Zeke asked. His tone told everyone around that he was annoyed with the games. For once, Samuel agreed.

"We've been working on a new kind of starship." The officer said. "It's been in the works for several years now and still has some testing to be done, but the addition of the Elites to our cause has put us light-years ahead of where we would be."

"What kind of starship?" Landon asked. Samuel wouldn't have been surprised if the Spartan was drooling over the idea of a new starship.

"It's modeled after the Marathon-class Cruiser, but that's only in size and shape. At 106,000 tons, it's just a little larger than its counterpart, and a Hell of a lot meaner." He grinned. "But don't take my word for it; come with me back to the base, and see for yourself."

"Where's the base?"

"It's on the southern coast of Argentina," he said, "near the Falkland Islands."

"Are you freakin' kidding me?" Zeke snapped angrily. "It's colder

than a well-digger's ass in the Klondikes down there!"

Samuel rolled his eyes, suppressing a smile. He'd forgotten just how bitter Ezekiel was to the cold.

"Aw," Blaine said, "it won't be so bad. Just think: you've got shark in you now, so a little cold water shouldn't be such a big deal, right?"

"Great whites swim in warm water." Victoria whispered.

"Yeah, dumb-ass," Zeke said.

"Well yeah," Blaine said without missing a beat, "but sharks also don't have temperature-stabilizing armor."

Ezekiel mumbled something foul under his breath.

"Alright," Samuel said, getting everyone's attention. "We'll go. When do we leave?"

The man from ONI rubbed his chin, as if pondering the question. Finally, he looked Samuel right in the eye and answered, "now."

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel scowled, narrowing his eyes behind the pair of pitch-black sunglasses he wore as an almost-suitable substitute for his visor. While five of the other Spartans were back in their MJOLNIR armor, sitting comfortably inside one of the Naval Intelligence Office's Pelicans on their way to the southern tip of South America, he was in his formal attire, waiting patiently to arrive. Victoria was also without her typical armor.<p>

The Sangheili SpecOps Commander, U'svere, upon hearing that the Spartans were departing for another battle, immediately opted for the two DNA-altered soldiers to turn over their armor for a special "enhancement," as the alien had put it. Victoria instantly jumped on the offer, but Ezekiel had taken some convincing. Only when the Elite had sworn on his honor to have the suit back to Zeke before the Spartan left the planet did he finally agree.

Now, however, he was regretting ever considering the idea. Zulu Company was on its way to a place with subzero temperatures, and he didn't even have the comfort of his temperature-regulating MJOLNIR armor.

\_Still,\_ he thought, \_I'll have it before we board.\_ He was trying to be optimistic; really he was, but it wasn't something that came easy to him. All he could contemplate at the moment was how much he despised the Sangheili for stripping his armor from him just as he was about to be plunged into a winter-wasteland.

"Miserable pains in-"

"What's that, Zeke?" Samuel asked.

Zeke grimaced. "Not a thing, Sam." He said. "Not a damn thing."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Alright, so, just a few things before I let you all go for this week:<strong>

\*\*(1) I realize that, with the Orbital Defense Platforms and a few other things, I stretched my reasoning a little beyond what was provided in the Halo series, but for what's coming, I needed the ODPs removed, and there is no adequate source (to my knowledge) to tell me the positions of the power-plants, the number of MACs they provided energy for, or the specific source of energy they were run on. So...I took some artistic license to keep things running smoothly. Actually, a lot of the delay in getting this chapter up was due to my lack of ideas on how to make this all work.\*\*

\*\*(2) As I mentioned in a specific review-response, I'm debating on actually keeping the Sangheili around for the duration of this mission. If I do, please note, that it will be only the individual soldiers that you've become familiar with (specifically Ahrmonro and U'svere). I have scenarios played out both with and without them, so it's just a matter of preference. Left entirely up to me, I would probably remove them, but, since I think either way could play out to be kinda cool, I'm leaving it up to you all. Anyone who hasn't reviewed but has been reading...you're also welcome to take a vote, should you like to. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*(3) The next chapter will describe this new starship that both Samson00 and I have put hours into (literally). I will warn everyone ahead of time that it's got some parts that are new and unorthodox, but I would ask that you trust my semi-close-to-nearly-decent abilities as a writer to make it work and do it well...also, I would ask that you trust Samson's college-level Physics class, as he's been invaluable in all this. So, my little thanks goes to Samson now, and my BIG thanks will go out to him after a couple more chapters. In conclusion, I'd just like to ask everyone to keep a fairly open mind, and rest assured that whatever I "bring to the table," so to speak, I will describe to the best of my ability and use it as well as any UNSC commander would. :)\*\*

\*\*(4) Finally, I do not think that there will be delay in the next chapter or two but, just in case there is, assume that it will be small and that I'm doing it to work out the technicalities of this ship and its role in space. Trust me, even with a pre-assembled "model," the Marathon-class Cruiser, it's still a complicated job, and it seems like I spend every spare moment looking for a flaw in it. I have found few so far and have removed them...so I do hope that you'll enjoy it when it is finally unveiled.\*\*

\*\*SO, next time...you all get the scoop on the most powerful ship ever to grace the UNSC military. And don't worry: it comes with an equally-awesome name, courtesy of Samson00. See you all later, and I hope you'll review! Thanks!\*\*

#### 40. Chapter 39: Exact Science

\*\*Author's Notes: Alright! This is it, folks! The last lead-up and informational chapter before the real action begins! So, to get started as soon as possible, I'm gonna skip my usual three-paragraph rant and go straight to the Reviews.\*\*

**\*\*REVIEWS:\*\***

**\*\*killerman83:ca:** Hey! I just posted a review to your story not too long ago. I apologize for the lack of a PM...my Private Message system hasn't been working for squat. Anyways, I hope you like what's ahead...it's a lot of specifications and details, but I think it'll keep everyone on their toes for the next chapter.\*\*

**\*\*AosUnderSol:** lol, I didn't say they were getting cloaking! ;) Why would you go and guess that? Honestly...lol. Anyway, here's the ship description I promised everyone...hehehe.\*\*

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** Hey, I'm glad you've been looking forward to this one...it's a lot of detail, which I know is something you appreciate more than some people (including me...at some points...lol). I hope it's as good as I've portrayed it to be. Only time will tell though, lol. Oh, and thank you for your compliments about the writing...and don't worry about me and my worrying about how I write. I'm content with this one! Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** Uh-oh, lol, I have a physics-buff reading my chapter about a super-starship and risky, unorthodox technology...can you say "intimidating?" lol. Still, I've double and triple-checked most everything in here...what I don't know after all the research, I can just shake my head at and say "I tried." haha. But, seriously, I await any advice/criticism/admiration (that would be a nice one...lol) that you have to offer. I hope this new Marathon-class Cruiser lives up to everyone's expectations (which, I think, won't be a problem). Also, I think I will be keeping the Sangheili, at least for a while. So, thanks for your review, and I hope you like Chapter 39!\*\*

**\*\*0756:** Hello again! First off, yes, I know it's kind of early to say that I'll be doing another pair of stories on Zulu Company, but the sequel to this one I've had in the "brainstorming" stages for a long time...and just here recently decided, for sure, that I was going to do it. The third one, I want to...we'll see how long it takes me to get there. And, in regards to the compliments: I give them when I believe them to be warranted. And, yes, you have a deal! :)\*\*

**\*\*lol,** I didn't think I picked out a "new bomb," per se...just not one used very often. Though, I'll tell you now, there's a LOT of "new" technology coming up in this chapter. Some of it so cool (to me) that I want a movie made of this book...just so I can see the space-battle! lol. Anyways, I think it'll all work out and everyone will forgive me for the liberties, lol. And, in regards to the Elites: I'm keeping them around for a little while, anyway...just because they're cool. ;)\*\*

**\*\*Oh yeah,** and on your note about Halo 3: I agree COMPLETELY! I wanted Hunters on my side SO BADLY (the Grunts...meh, I'd probably still end up shooting them). I was gonna include Hunters and Grunts in this story as allies...but I wanted to follow the series to the best of my ability...and they didn't. Oh well...\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** lol, yeah, you can expect to hear a LOT of moaning and groaning from the most cynical of the Spartans. But, that's okay...it's amusing as far as I can tell. I hope you like what's coming: I've got a giant starship and an armor-enhancement with



Zulu's name on them. And, yes, I will be keeping the Elites as well...at least, for a little while. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*hellhound cerberus: Hey, no worries! I'm glad you got around to reviewing for this chapter. And yes, Zeke is awesome (I'm biased, lol). Humility...not really his thing, lol. And YES, he is very, very much a...well, you can fill in the blank with whatever choice word happens to come to mind. And I'm flattered that you would model a Spartan after him. I won't tell him though...can't have his ego getting any bigger than it already is. ;)\*\*) \*\*

\*\*Rimshooter: Hey! Okay...here we go:

>(1) Okay...so I don't know my solar power all that well. Still though, I don't think Norway gets sunlight all year, does it? I mean, all day long. Roughly...three-quarters of the year? Maybe eight or nine months? The equator, while getting less light all the time, would get it consistantly year-round. We can't have the ODPs shorting out for three months, lol. I'm not sure how "sound" any of this is, but it was the way I looked at it. lol, to each their own.<br>(2) Also, I will be keeping the Sangheili, at least for a while. :)

>(3) lol, not much to say for me either...haha<br>(4) Twelve pages, huh? I got fourteen for you here! I'm sorry...not a lot of "spectacular action," but it's long for you. Promise. ;) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: lol, if you were waiting on Landon's reaction...wait no more! It has arrived, in the form of a brand new \_Marathon\_-class Cruiser! Also, in regards to Zeke and Vic's new upgrades...you'll have to read on and find out. ;) Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: Yeah, sorry for the lack of real action...I promise, it was imperative. As is this one. I hope this one at least keeps you busy and gets you interested more than the last one (it should...hehe). And no...there was not a really substantial mention of Zeke's hatred for the cold. It's a part of the personality he's based on that I hadn't had cause to think about or include yet but, since it's so...profound...within the person whom he's based on, I couldn't pass it up. My bad though, on not including some reference. As for the ship...well, you will see. I promise, it will be something to remember. Finally, in regards to Magnus and his lack of experience...he is mentioned in this chapter (THAT should get you reading! lol. haha), and some important details will be shown to everyone.\*\*

\*\*havok5: Well, hello! In response to your guess: Hey, sorry...I can't answer whether you're right or wrong right here...you'll have to read on and find out. But thank you very much for taking the time to review/guess at it! Perhaps you'd be kind enough to do so again some time?\*\*) \*\*

\*\*ALRIGHT, with that out of the way, I now introduce you to one of my toughest chapters to write thus far...Chapter 39: Exact Science! The great super-starship will be revealed. Zulu Company will travel into a top-secret, restricted area...hosted by none-other-than the Office of Naval Intelligence. And also, Magnus-fans: your first bit of information on what seems to be many people's favorite Spartan. Hold on to your hats! ;)\*\*) \*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 39:<strong>

â€" \*\*Exact Science â€" \*\*

\*\*0300 Hours - February 1, 2553\*\*

\*\*UNSC Pelican: November 184 - Unknown Coordinates Above Southern Argentina\*\*

"ETA: five minutes." The pilot's voice echoed over the intercom into the back of the Pelican. He added with a laugh, "hope you all brought your space-heaters, it's a little chilly out there."

Ezekiel scoffed loudly, letting every other Spartan know how uncomfortable he was with the situation. Victoria only laughed.

"Oh, come on." She said. "It's not that bad." She motioned to her clothing, which was only a pair of long jeans, a shirt, and a thick jacket. "I don't have my suit either, and you don't see me complaining."

"No," he snapped back, "I see you pestering me, your usual pastime."

"Well, fine," she said bitterly. She mentally kicked herself.

\_That's what you get,\_ she thought.\_ Never, ever try to cheer up Ezekiel Veron. Honestly, you should know better, after all these years.\_

And yet, she tried anyway. "If we get some downtime before the ship goes into orbit, what do you say we do some sparring? Maybe it'll get you to-"

"It's four degrees outside!" He said, clenching his fists. "The only fighting I'll be engaging in will be with the spineless, split-lip Sangheili that took my armor!"

"Quit your bitching!" Blaine growled. "You've been at it since we left New Mexico. One more word," he threatened, "and I'll push you out the back, right into the snow."

A second later, Ezekiel was firing back, letting the verbal shots fly like a fountain from his mouth. Victoria laughed as the two of them jabbed at one another. One would've thought they were related, the way they bickered. After a minute or so, she cleared her throat and jumped in as Blaine continued to holler back at the smaller Spartan. No sooner had she done so, however, than she was immediately interrupted.

"Quiet!" Samuel said. "All of you!" When everyone was silent, he shrugged heavily. "I know you guys are a team â€" and a flawless one â€" on the battlefield," he said, "but that is not an excuse to drive me nuts every time you get a day off. If you do, trust me: you will

not like the consequences."

Victoria suppressed a laugh. Samuel was the team's leader, and he treated the other Spartans like family. What was he going to do?

"Right," Ezekiel said, rolling his eyes.

"Yes," Samuel said, "right. Because the next time you start something, I'm changing your combat position."

"Meaning?" Zeke said, turning his head toward the brown-armored leader. Victoria still couldn't see his eyes though: they were behind the same set of sunglasses he constantly wore when his suit was off.

"Meaning," he said, "that instead of letting you do what you do best and make your own combination of close-quarters slicing and long-range sniping, I will put you in the communications-building with as many ONI operatives as I can pack in there." He cracked his knuckles. "And I'm over ten feet tall with arms bigger than your head; I can pack quite a few."

"ETA: sixty seconds." The pilot said, and Victoria felt the Pelican begin to descend rapidly. Thankfully, the pilot had been kind enough to keep the rear-hatch closed during the landing-sequence.

Not all of them were so considerate—especially those from the Office of Naval Intelligence.

"Alright guys," Landon said, bouncing a little in his seat like a small child. "Here we go! Time to see this new starship that ONI guy kept going on about!" Victoria laughed at his inability to contain himself. At heart, he was a big kid.

"Yeah," Blaine said. There wasn't an ounce of cheerfulness in his voice. "Let's see what the miserable bastards have been up to for the past few years."

The Pelican's descent slowed steadily until Victoria could feel that it was hovering in place, most likely only a few meters from the ground. The rear-hatch dropped open and a blast of frigid air flew in, chilling her to the bone. Ezekiel growled lowly from the other side of the dropship.

"Spartans!" the ONI operative that had met them in Albuquerque yelled from outside the hatch. He was wearing a thick coat that was almost comical, but Victoria was too cold to even crack a smile. Her face felt like it was frozen in place. "Let's go! We've got a long walk ahead of us!"

\* \* \*

><p>"How much further is this God-forsaken base of yours?" Ezekiel shouted angrily from near the back of the group. There were ten of them in all: seven Spartans, the lead ONI operative in front, and another pair of lower-ranking soldiers bringing up the rear—and they'd been walking for more than thirty minutes.<p>

The officer pointed straight ahead, to what appeared to be a small

town, although Blaine could barely make out anything in the blowing snow. It was coming down in huge white gusts rather than individual flakes, and his visibility was all but completely shot.

"That is not an answer!" Zeke said. "I asked how far!"

"Another quarter-of-a-mile!" the man answered bitterly.

Blaine gritted his teeth and continued walking as they approached the small town. As they got closer, he was able to make out more details about the buildings "or their remains" that were surrounding them. It was a small settlement with less than a dozen structures, all of which were in ruins except one. It looked like a garage.

"What is this place?" Samuel asked.

"It's just the remains of an old town from God-knows-when." The officer answered. "The Office of Naval Intelligence bought the land for building purposes, but it hasn't been used, so the buildings have been left to rot. The only thing we've kept up and running is the garage, because it houses our transport to the base."

"Transport!" Ezekiel barked in disbelief. "I'm freezing my ass off! I thought you said this was the base, not just another piece of 'transport' to get to there."

"It's the only way there." He answered shrewdly. "Now follow me inside and grab a Warthog."

The man led them into the garage, which, as far as Blaine could tell, was used sparingly. It was a single-story building with a flat, concrete floor and a row of a dozen Warthogs against the back wall. The opposite wall had been remade into a series of vertically-opening, vehicle-accommodating doors.

Immediately, the two low-ranking officers walked to the nearest 'Hog and took their places inside it. One of them jumped into the driver's seat while the other quickly leapt into the back. It took Blaine a second realize that, in addition to that Warthog, every vehicle in the room was of the "troop-transport" kind with a large metal "cage" on the back, where the mounted turret should have been.

The ONI officer hopped into the passenger seat of the Warthog being driven by the soldier. "So that we can save a little on transport costs," he said, "why doesn't one of you un-armored Spartans ride in here with us? That way, we'll only have to take three 'Hogs."

Blaine saw Victoria flinch out of the corner of his eye. At the same time, the ONI officer let a cruel smirk crawl across his face. Blaine was about to say something when Ezekiel stepped forward.

"I'll ride with the spooks." He said nonchalantly. The operative, for some reason, got a dejected look on his face.

"Oh," he said solemnly, "I was hoping that, perhaps, the lady would want to ride with us. We have a lot to talk about." He gave a big, deceptive smile to Victoria, but Zeke stepped between them.

Without a word, he walked straight up to the driver-side door of the

Warthog, turning his back to the other Spartans, and put his hands on the door, presumably for support. Zeke leaned over the driver, looking directly at the officer in the other seat. Blaine watched him grab his sunglasses and could barely see him tilting them downward, probably so that he could glare right at the man.

"Not one of you has a word to say to her, understand me?" The Spartan whispered viciously. Blaine, even with the help of his MJOLNIR armor, could barely make out the Spartan's words. After that, however, his tone got lower, and Blaine could no longer discern what was being said. A few seconds later, Zeke jumped casually into the back of the 'Hog.

"Just follow our Warthog." The spook said cautiously. "It's a fairly short drive, but you'll get lost in an instant in weather like this." The man looked from Spartan to Spartan, but was exceedingly careful that his eyes never even approached Victoria. "And, if you do get lost," he added, "we're not looking for you. We don't have time to waste manpower finding a group of six soldiers."

"Oh," the soldier in the driver's side laughed, "what if I just happen to go a little too fast and lose 'em? Huh?" He glanced at the Spartans with a look of amusement.

"Well," the passenger said with a smirk, "then I guess they'd be in a little trouble." He too seemed to be getting too much pleasure out of this scenario. Blaine considered flipping the Warthogâ€|then remembered that Ezekiel was in the back.

A second later, he grinned and started to walk toward it.

"Sure," Samuel said coldly, stopping him in his tracks. He too approached the driver of the Warthog. "Just remember," he said to the spook, "if you, for some reason, decide that leaving us behind is a good idea, you have a Spartan in the back who is â€" literally â€" always packing."

Both soldiers' faces went grim as the Spartan in the back leaned through the cage and gave his trademark smirk. "If you were wondering," he whispered harshly, "I've got two M6G Pistols, four grenades, an Energy Sword, my Sniper Rifle, and a pair of combat knives on me at the moment." He shrugged, adding, "too lightly armed, I knowâ€|but I just thought I'd let you know in case you were curious."

"Those three against him," Landon said, speaking through the secured link established by the MJOLNIR armor, "my money's on Zeke."

Jason laughed. "No shit, Sherlock."

After that, the men were silent as they watched the Spartans file into their own 'Hogs. Landon and Jason â€" of course â€" were driving. Samuel was in the back of one, as he was too large to fit in the passenger seat. Stephanie was in the passenger seat with him and Jason. Victoria stepped up to the 'Hog that Landon was driving and looked to Blaine, asking with her expression where he wanted to sit.

He nodded, motioning for her to sit in the passenger seat. She smiled and jumped in. Blaine walked to the Warthog, passing the one Zeke was

riding in and tapping the bumper twice as he did so. "Have fun," he said with a smile. He looked at the two officers and motioned to Ezekiel. "And watch that guy," he said warningly, "all that shark-DNA; he really just loses it sometimes."

All three of the men from ONI exchanged nervous glances, and Blaine took his seat in the back of Landon's Warthog, grinning from ear to ear.

\* \* \*

><p>"So, where exactly is this base?" Ezekiel asked bitterly after driving for nearly an hour. As expected, he was still chilled to the bone.<p>

"It's in the Andes Mountains." The soldier sitting across from him answered casually. Ezekiel decided to take whatever rope the man would give him and ask a little more.

"Why would you build a starship in the middle of a partially-volcanic mountain chain?" The Spartan asked, trying not to sound condescending.

The man shrugged. "It's a misconception that many of the volcanic areas are still active." He said. "Most of them cooled off a couple-hundred years ago. Those are the ones that ONI hollowed out and made the base inside."

"That still doesn't explain why you chose to do it here. I mean, why not someplaceâ€|I don't know, warmer? Like Hawaii?"

"There were large tungsten deposits in these mountains when construction first began," the soldier said. "In addition to other materials, I guess, but that was the reason I was always given."

"What's that you're telling him back there?" The operative in the passenger seat asked suspiciously. When the soldier hesitated, he added, "I don't think I have to tell you that everything about this area is classified."

Ezekiel scoffed. "That's kind of ridiculous, don't you think?" He asked. "In all fairness, I'm on my way there, and â€" while I only have a vague idea of where we are â€" Demon, I'm sure, knows damn-well exactly where I'm atâ€|and he's not even here!"

"Your AI is forbidden from disclosing anything about this project to anyone outside of ONI and the highest of individuals within HIGHCOM," the operative said sternly, "as are you."

Ezekiel scowled, glaring at the man from behind his sunglasses. "You ONI spooks are unbelievable." He said, rolling his eyes. "You come for our help, and then you act like we're not up to par with your little social group or something." He laughed bitterly. "You guys have a country club or something we can join?"

"What can I say?" The operative asked sarcastically. "We run in different circles."

Zeke smirked cruelly and, without a second's pause, retorted, "yeah,

ours has other people in it."

At this, the man turned around to in his seat, glaring at the Spartan. "I'm curious," he snapped, "is there a reason for your blatant disdain towards the Office of Naval Intelligence, or are you just another soldier, blinded by your irrational hatred for those who are working behind the scenes to keep our war-effort going, as opposed to being shot at on the front lines?"

Zeke smiled, extremely pleased with the reaction he'd gotten. "First of all," he answered, "while I would love to see people like you on the front lines being shot atâ€¦" he trailed off, smirking. "Anyways, no, that's not the reason for my abhorrence toward your organization." He took the sunglasses from his face, letting the cold air nip at his eyes. "I hate you because, not three weeks after our last augmentations, not three days after our first fight against the Covenant, you came to the Training Ground, circling like the miserable vultures you are, and took two of our teammates, giving us no reason or recourse."

The man cocked his head. "You're talking about **\*\*Spartans\*\*** **\*\*007\*\*** and **\*\*008\*\***, correct?"

Ezekiel nodded, still scowling. "Yeah, that's right."

"We returned the female." The operative said indifferently, shrugging. He smiled coldly. "What more do you want?"

Ezekiel narrowed his eyes, glaring and ignoring the man's quips. "You're cowards; all of you. You put two-hundred kids, including the twenty-five of us, through more tests and mazes than a lab mouse. And then, when it's all said and done â€" when we're finally finished with all your life-threatening procedures â€" you decide it's still not good enough."

Still, the man was apathetic. "Perhaps you've forgotten," he said, "but I still outrank you, and name-calling is not an effective means of getting anywhere."

Zeke snarled, "no, I'd much rather use the sword in my jacket or rifle on my back. Unfortunately, that too is barred byâ€¦" he searched for the right word, "circumstances." He paused, inhaling deeply, savoring the idea. "Too bad," he growled.

"Careful, Spartan," the soldier beside him warned, flashing the grip of a sidearm inside his coat. Zeke smiled wickedly.

"Please," he said. "Quit deluding yourself. You'd be dead before you even realized you'd pissed me off."

"So, I'm curious." The man in the passenger's seat butted in, completely ignoring the confrontation going on in the back seat. "Did you ever wonder what became of your teammate, **\*\*Spartan 007\*\***?"

Instantly, the man had the soldier's full attention. Ezekiel was only thankful that he'd put his sunglasses back on and that they had masked the majority of his reaction. "Occasionally," he answered coolly. "And his name was Magnus."

"Was?" the man gave another irritating smile. "Well, you'll be happy to know that he's alive and well. He's been through numerous tests and augmentations since you last saw him, however."

Zeke felt his mind stall. Was it even possible? He knew that a few of the others had kept up the hope that Magnus would return, but he himself had long since given up hope on the larger Spartan. The odds were simply impossible.

"He's alive?" he asked disbelievingly.

The operative nodded. "Alive and well," he said. "He's been on four of the continents, waging war with the Covenant all by himself."

Ezekiel stared from behind his black lenses. He'd been fighting alone?

"Yeah, I know," the spook continued, "I'd be hard-pressed to believe it too, if I hadn't seen him do it. Trust me; his new augmentations make the original tests done at the Training Ground look like a third-grade science-fair project."

\* \* \*

><p>"I can't believe Zeke opted to ride with the spooks." Jason said from the driver's seat. "That's not exactly in-character for him."<p>

"He sensed that Victoria didn't want to go." Samuel answered. "She flinched at the thought of being alone and without armor with a trio of those people." Even saying it, Samuel still had a hard time processing the idea. He'd been on the brink of stepping forward and ordering Ezekiel to do it, but never imagined the smaller Spartan would elect to go without a little incentive.

\_Ulterior motives,\_ Samuel thought.

"How close do you think we are?" Stephanie asked from the back of the 'Hog, snapping Samuel back into reality.

"I'm not sure," Jason said, "but I think we're headed into the mountains. If that's the case, it could be anywhere from another half-hour to three more hoursâ€|depending on where in the mountains it is."

Samuel leaned back, stretching in the large, open back of the Warthog. "I just want to get there and get this over with." He said. "These ONI operatives are putting everyone on edge."

"Zeke'll put 'em in their place!" Stephanie laughed from the passenger-seat.

The brown-armored Spartan sighed. "That's what I'm afraid of. That's just what we need," he said sarcastically, "Zeke slicing a trio of ONI operatives into ribbons and leaving us stranded in the middle of a blizzard."

"On that happy note," Jason said cynically, "we're slowing down."



Samuel sat up immediately. "You think we're close?"

"Maybe," he said. "The so-called 'road' they've been following definitely leads into the mountains. I sure hope we're close; I don't like the idea that two of our teammates have been unarmored for so long."

"Speaking of," Stephanie interjected, "what was the deal with Victoria earlier?"

Jason glanced at her, then returned his view to the road. Samuel just stared blankly. "What?"

"Those creeps from ONI," she said, "why do you think they wanted her to ride with them?"

Samuel shrugged. "I don't know." He admitted. "But I had a terrible feeling about it the moment they offered. After her last trip to ONI headquarters, I can't believe they had the nerve even to ask." Subconsciously, his fists clenched.

"I don't know either," Stephanie replied, "but I don't trust them as far as I can spit. I can't believe Ezekiel was willing to ride alone with them."

Suddenly, Jason began laughing hysterically, so much so that the Warthog began to swerve perilously on the road. "Oh, come on!" He said, "I'm surprised those goons were willing to ride alone with Ezekiel. That might be why they wanted Victoria: she's a safer travel-companion."

"That being said," Stephanie replied, "I still don't like it. I know that we've always been a little more suspicious than is normal towards the Naval Intelligence Office, but this is really bothering me. We're in the middle of a wasteland with two unarmored soldiers, being led to a place we were told nothing about, by a trio of operatives who have already expressed their amusement at leaving us out here to die."

"We'd be fine," Samuel said, "if they left us out here, the MJOLNIR suits would regulate our temperatures enough to keep us going strong. Victoria and Ezekiel would be the only concerns, and I have faith they'd both do fine. One is too stubborn to die. The other is tough as nails." He paused. "You can take your guesses as to who's who."

Stephanie started to respond, but Jason cut her off. "Guys," he said, "I think I know where we're going."

Samuel looked ahead, struggling to get a view of what was beyond the white wall of falling snow. It took him a moment, but then he saw it.

There, built into the side of one of the mountains, was a set of huge double-doors. There were no other markings to show that this particular mountain was any different from the countless others that stretched for hundreds of miles up the South American continent.

"It's about time!" Blaine's voice echoed in Sam's helmet from the Warthog behind them. "If I had to tolerate Landon's driving for another minute, I was just gonna say "screw it!" and get out and walk!"

\* \* \*

><p>Landon let out a low whistle as he parked the Warthog and looked around. Once inside the mountain, the drive had been a fast one. Two minutes in, after driving through a series of narrow tunnels and pathways, the ONI-driven vehicle in front of them slowed to a stop outside of another set of double-doors. Landon put the 'Hog in park and stepped out.<p>

"This is it?" Blaine asked casually, walking up to the doors behind the ONI operatives. Ezekiel walked back to the group, smirking.

"This is it." The leading officer said, inputting a numeric code in a small, electronic keypad on the wall. A second later, the doors swung open, and the hall gave way to an enormous, four-story room that stretched the length of two football fields. There were dozens upon dozens of men and women in Naval Intelligence uniforms, marching this way and that, each of them completely indifferent to the seven Spartans that had entered the room.

The Spartans followed the three soldiers that had taken them to the base as they led them toward the far side of the room. Landon couldn't get over it. The room was roughly dome-shaped, with computers, models of starships, and large screens all over the place. As far as he was concerned, they might as well have been inside HIGHCOM itself.

"So, where's the ship?" Jason asked, voicing the thoughts of every Spartan.

"Patience," the man leading them said bitterly. He walked up to a titanium door on the wall and it slid open instantly.

After more than fifteen minutes of following the ONI spook through the cavernous confines of the base, the Spartans were led into a single-story hallway that gave way to a large viewing window on the far side. The hallway itself stretched for nearly thirty meters in both directions, and the large, wall-sized window extended with it. Slowly, the Spartans walked up to it, and looked outside.

Landon looked out and, below, could see the lowest points in the mountains. There were numerous structures built directly into the rock and countless vehicles driving between them. For some reason, though, they were shadowed. The area was dark, and Landon couldn't figure out-

"Shit," Blaine said, looking out and slightly up. Landon glanced upwards and nearly fell over.

The \_Marathon\_-class Cruiser was hovering less than one-hundred feet above the tallest of the mountains. On its sides, Landon could make out multiple mounted guns and, on the front, a piece of it jutted out. He smiled.

\_The MAC Gun,\_ he thought.

A man in a white suit suddenly entered from a door at the right end of the hall. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, motioning to the Spartans. "Sorry for the long haul to get you here." He grinned and added, "it's a no-fly-zone."

"Yeah," Zeke said, "maybe you could do something about that in the future."

"I'm sorry for that," he said. "But, you'll be happy to know: the Elites just arrived with your armor." He paused for a moment before adding, "my apologies. I'm Vice Admiral Rick Agnes."

Instantly, seven Spartans were at a crisp salute.

"At ease," he said kindly. After a moment, he looked out the window, at the ship. "What do you think?" He asked, turning to them. "That's the most powerful ship in all of the UNSC."

"It looks almost exactly like a \_Marathon\_," Samuel said, "exactly as described."

The Vice Admiral smiled. "Almost exactly," he said. "It's twelve-hundred-and-nine meters long, three-hundred-sixty meters wide, four-hundred-twenty-three meters tall, and weighs in at about 106,000 tons."

"Not a lot bigger, then?" Landon asked, knowing the standard dimensions of the Marathon-class Cruiser were only slightly smaller.

"No, not a lot bigger," Agnes answered. "But it's a real miracle of development. It's powered by a prototype Antimatter Reactor that we got the hang of thanks to technology the Sangheili were kind enough to show us."

"An Antimatter Reactor?" Samuel asked. "That's a new one on me."

"Yeah," the Vice Admiral said. "It needs it to power everything onboard. There's a standard Pinch Fusion Reactor as well, but, in essence, it's got just enough energy that it might power the lights." He laughed heartily. "Trust me though, that Antimatter gives off more energy than you can imagine."

"I would imagine that a ship of this size is capable of Slipspace transportation." Ezekiel said, making the statement into a question.

Agnes was grinning from ear to ear. "Of course!" he said. "It's got a Covenant Slipspace Drive, which makes it infinitely faster than our other ships. Not only that, but with those kinds of Slipspace capabilities, our rifts are just about pinpoint accurate."

"So, what else?" Landon asked, curious. "What about its shield-system? Or the thickness of the hull? Complement troops? What's the armament look like?"

Agnes held up his hands. "Woah-woah-woah," he said with a laugh. "Let

me finish explaining the other technicalities first."

"Right," Landon said, regaining his composure. "Of course. Sorry."

The Vice Admiral waved his hand nonchalantly. "It's fine." He said. "It's good to see someone as interested in this ship as I am."

"If you were looking for someone passionate about vehicles â€" of any kind â€" Landon's your guy." Samuel said. "Now, about the ship's complementâ€|?"

"It holds twenty-four Longsword Interceptors, two UNSC Prowlers, and plenty of worthy Marines." He answered. "Also, the ship is automated by an AI, similar to the two Zulu Company uses."

"You mean Demon and Gael?" Victoria asked.

"Yeah," Agnes said, "that's right. The AI's name is Delilah. She's top-of-the-line, as far as Artificial Intelligence goes."

"Another female AI," Zeke said sarcastically, "splendid."

"She's not so bad," Agnes said. "And we need her to work the shields."

"Why is that?"

"With the knowledge we gained about Covenant plasma-weapons," the Vice Admiral said, "we learned that a strong magnetic pulse can disrupt the delicate fields that Covenant ships use to hold the plasma-shots in place. Now, normally, we'd have a hard time generating a pulse strong enough with the power from a normal Fusion Reactor. But, with the Antimatter Reactor, it's no longer as big of an issue."

"Wait," Stephanie said. "So you don't have shields? You have a pulse?"

"Let me start from the beginning. Before the battle ever starts, the ship will send out a few small space-probes that are completely undetectable to anything the Covenant will use. They're small. They don't move. They're nigh-impossible to see against the blackness of space. Okay?"

"Okay."

"These probes measure energy spikes from opposing ships. Each Covenant starship, of any kind, has to amass a certain amount of energy to fire its weapons. When they do, these probes read it and immediately send the information to Delilah. She then reads the information, calculates which weapon is being charged and how long it will be until it fires. Once that's figured out, she can activate the pulse with accuracy within one-one-hundredth of a second."

"And this pulse negates plasma-based projectiles?"

"To a point, it does." Agnes said. "It destroys the magnetic fields holding the plasma in place. At that point, it disperses considerably, and the plasma will either detonate prematurely or will

continue to move vaguely in the direction it was going. So, it doesn't completely negate damage, but it's more efficient than the energy we'd need for full shield-systems." He paused, then added, "also, the pulse will distort almost any particle-based weapon, solely due to polarity and the force behind it."

"What's the armament like?" Landon asked, jumping quickly to the business-end of the ship.

"Like any self-respecting Cruiser," Agnes said, "it's heavily-armed. It's got three Covenant-style Antimatter Bombs, four SHIVA Nuclear Missiles and remote-controlled Longswords to go with them, along with the standard Point-Defense Guns for close-range assaults."

"Not bad," Blaine said, unimpressed. "Nothing spectacular either."

"It's got a pair of laterally-mounted Covenant Plasma Torpedo Launchers, one on each side. In addition, it's packing two of those Energy Projectors that the Covenant uses to glass planets and strike at our MAC Guns from long-range. Those are both on the nose."

Landon was dumbfounded. "Nice," he whispered, thinking of the capabilities. "We've got full access to Covenant weaponry." He grinned. "Space-fighting just took a turn for the better."

"On top of that," Agnes said, "it holds the record for Archer Missiles. This monster sports fifty Oversized Archer Missile Pods, most of them bow-mounted. Several are mounted on the upper-hull and laterally as well."

"Fifty!" Jason said loudly. "The largest number of pods I've ever caught wind of being used was twenty-six, and that was on standard UNSC Destroyers."

The Vice Admiral shrugged, still smiling at the giant ship. "It's a titan," he said, "no doubt about that." He grinned again. "And you haven't even heard about our newest toy yet."

\* \* \*

><p>Rick Agnes could feel the tension and the curiosity welling up inside each of the seven Spartans before him. He had one last major weapon to reveal to them, and it was quite possibly the most powerful one in history.<p>

"It's an upgraded MAC Gun," he said. "Some of the boys call it the Big MAC." He shrugged. "I guess, when you're in space for so long, everything becomes a pun."

"Upgraded, how?" Landon asked.

"It's similar to a standard MAC Gun, but it runs on different principles. Instead of its design being that of a coilgun," Agnes said, "we're putting extra emphasis on the 'magnetic' part of the Magnetic Accelerator Cannon."

Again, he got blank stares.

"This time," he said, "we've engineered the gun to use similar

tungsten rounds, except that these rounds are charged, and instead of launching them the way we were, we went with powerful magnetic fields. The MAC round is placed within a tunnel inside the ship. It's the same one you see that juts out at one end." Agnes pointed. "See it?"

The Spartans nodded, listening intently.

"A large turbine is placed horizontally behind the round and begins to spin, using the power of the Antimatter Reactor to create an immensely powerful magnetic field. There are electromagnets near the charged tungsten round that create an opposing field to hold it in place while the turbine charges."

"Okay!"

"When the charge is strong enough, the electromagnets are turned off, and the MAC round shoots out, powered by the magnetic field." He paused, catching his breath as the Spartans nodded in understanding. "By firing it this way, we've amplified the velocity of a shot from the old MAC Guns from 4-percent of the speed of light to about 55-percent."

"Are you kidding?" Jason said disbelievingly. "That's insane! You have a three-thousand-ton tungsten round traveling at more than half the speed of light!"

"Not only that," Agnes continued, "but at a certain speed, the mass of an object increases dynamically. That single MAC round would blast right through a Covenant Capital Ship or CCS Battlecruiser, no problem." He smiled fondly at the ship, and then added, "that's the reason for the pulse-type shields: we couldn't power the turbine, the electromagnets, and the ship's other basic functions at the same time if we had to continuously power a shield, even with the Antimatter Reactor."

"That's incredible." Samuel said. "So this thing has pinpoint Slipspace technology, a new kind of pulse-shield, two-dozen Longswords, two Energy Projectors, two Plasma Torpedo Launchers, fifty Oversized Pods, Point-Defense Guns, and a MAC Gun that fires at half the speed of the light."

Agnes smiled and forced himself to remain stoic in spite of the emotion building up inside. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said proudly, "Allow me to introduce you to the Atonement of Reach."

\* \* \*

><p>"Not to be disrespectful," Samuel said as the Vice Admiral led the Spartans into an elevator that would take them to the bottom of the mountain, "but I've never heard your name mentioned before. Have you been a Vice Admiral long?"<p>

Agnes smiled as the elevator opened and he stepped inside. "I was an Upper Rear Admiral," he said. "It was during the Battle of Reach."

"You were at Reach?"

"I was." Agnes said, a hint of sorrow in his voice. A split-second

later, it was replaced by his usual demeanor as the elevator descended rapidly. "I was in command of the UNSC Eclipse, another Marathon-class Cruiser. We were overwhelmed at Reach and I was forced to initiate the Cole Protocol after our MAC Gun was temporarily disabled and our Archer Missiles were almost completely spent."

"You were promoted for turning tail and jumping?" Ezekiel asked bitterly as the Spartans stepped out of the elevator. Samuel considered striking the smaller Spartan, but then remembered that he was without his armor. The hit would likely kill him.

"No!" A man in black military attire snapped angrily from the Spartans' left. "He was promoted because, after the jump, he was pursued by â€" and defeated â€" a contingent of four Covenant Frigates and a Destroyer!"

"Three of the Frigates were damaged," Agnes clarified, "one heavily so, but it didn't make the battle much easier. We were lucky, and the Covenant didn't leave Reach for some time, so we beat them to the Slipspace destination. When we got there, I sent the last of our Longswords to meet them when they arrived. Three of the fighters were equipped with SHIVA Nuclear Warheads."

"How many did that take out?"

"The three Longswords were covered in ablative coating and left drifting near where we departed Slipspace. When the Covenant arrived, the first three ships to lower their shields and charge their torpedoes were completely obliterated by the nukes. The resulting explosions damaged the shields of the Destroyer and the other Frigate. By that time, I'd rerouted all our power to the MAC Gun for one more shot." He smiled. "That was all we needed. The round gutted the Covenant Destroyer, and all that remained was a single damaged Frigate with no shields. The remaining Archer Missiles and Longswords were more than enough to finish the job."

Ezekiel lowered his head. "My apologies," he said respectfully. "In all honesty, I'm not used to hearing of valiant deeds within the Office of Naval Intelligence."

"Forget about it," the Vice Admiral said casually. "No harm done. Now, let me show you my pride and joy." He led them outside, into the frigid cold, and Samuel could see the enormous ship hovering high above their heads.

"It's incredible," Samuel said, still unable to believe how advanced the ship seemed, at least in terms of UNSC technology. "I can't believe we were able to build this."

"Well," Agnes said, "a great deal of thanks goes to the Sangheili. We'd be nowhere without them. The Antimatter Reactor wouldn't even be working yet." At that, he led the Spartans directly under the ship, staring up.

"So..." Blaine said. "How exactly do we get up there?"

"This is Vice Admiral Agnes," he said suddenly, speaking into a microphone implanted into his suit, "we're ready to go." He laughed and added, "beam me up, Scotty."

And, at that second, a wide, blue beam of light shot down and formed a circle around the group. At first, Samuel didn't realize that he was in a huge Gravity Lift, but it was made immediately apparent as vertigo set in and the Spartans, along with the Vice Admiral, were lifted slowly off the ground.

\* \* \*

><p>Jason couldn't believe it. Somehow, the inside of the <em>Atonement</em> was as impressive as its exterior. It had the linear, geometrically-shaped structure that the UNSC typically used, but combined it flawlessly with a modest amount of the purple hues and sophisticated archways that the Covenant employed ubiquitously in their starships.

The Gravity Lift had taken the group of soldiers into a large, dome-shaped room with more than a dozen doors in it – all of them Covenant-style. Agnes had led them through one of them and through a maze of storage rooms and hallways, pointing out the occasional important place, like a Weapons Locker or Cryo-Chamber.

"Here we are," he said suddenly, stopping in front of a large computer screen mounted to the wall on one side of the hallway. It was easily a ten-by-ten-foot square, Jason thought.

"What is it?"

The Vice Admiral ignored the question, walking up to a keypad and inputting a short numeric sequence. The screen flickered to life, and a huge, digital map of the ship appeared.

"We're here," Agnes said, pointing near the middle of the ship's digital image and toward the bottom, "in the middle segment."

Jason knew that the \_Marathon\_-class Cruisers were fairly similar to their \_Halcyon\_-class predecessors, especially in size and shape. While the segmented sections were slightly different (specifically in being their pentagonal or octagonal and their relative positions to the rest of the ship), the concept was the same. Much like the earlier ships, the \_Marathons\_ had the bridge located toward the bow of the ship, close to the keel; slots for lifepods were located on the ship's underbelly; and the docking bays were distributed throughout.

"In contrast to a normal \_Marathon\_-class starship," Agnes said, still pointing at the digital image, "the \_Atonement\_ has four docking bays, all of which are located near the bow, with two on each side." A second later, four points on the image lit up, glowing bright green.

\_Okay,\_ Jason thought, \_time to start the old mental-rolodex.\_

"In addition, there are no lifepods located beneath the ship, mostly due to time-constraints that we've had." He paused. "Other than that, it's very similar. The bridge is here." He pointed toward the front, in the first segment of the Cruiser, and a blue light lit up. "There are armories here, here, here, here, here, and here." His hand moved rapidly, pointing to a half-dozen spots on the image, all of which began to glow red when he touched them.



Jason committed each of the glowing points to memory in an instant, especially the armories. Somehow, he knew he'd need them later. Things never turned out the way they were supposed to.

"The Slipspace Drive requires a lot more space than it did in our previous vessels," Agnes continued. He pointed toward the back of the ship. "It's located here. Also, the Antimatter Reactor can be accessed through here." He traced his finger along a set of halls and passages and left it in place in almost the exact center of the ship. The two rooms lit up yellow and white, respectively.

"Wow," Stephanie said, thoroughly impressed, "you've got this down to a 'T,' don't you, sir?"

Agnes smiled. "As well I should." He said bluntly. "This is my ship. It's all that's left of Reach." He turned to the Spartans. "I forgot to mention to you: I grew up on Reach. When it was destroyed, I didn't know what to do. All I wanted was to finish the Covenant, to kill every last one of them."

Jason stared, dumbfounded. Silently, he mouthed "thank you" for the visor that was covering his glazed-over face.

"That's why this ship is named as it is." Agnes said, frowning for the first time since the Spartans arrived. "My ship was totaled, so I headed up a new project for a brand new ship." He held his arms out, motioning to the walls around them. "This is my last chance to avenge everyone who died on Reach and to mitigate our failure to save the planet—my failure." He paused, breathing deeply. "This is my last chance for atonement."

Suddenly, a loudspeaker on the wall behind them came to life. "Vice Admiral Agnes," it said, "please report to the bridge ASAP."

Just like that, he was smiling again. "And trust me," he said, "the Atonement of Reach will be just that." With that, he led the Spartans down a series of corridors and into three separate elevators.

Ten minutes later, they entered the bridge.

"Welcome, sir," said a man as soon as they walked in. He was in an ONI uniform and Jason counted nine pins and medals on his suit. Not only that, but he was the first operative from that office to actually smile at the Spartans as they walked in. "And I would assume that this is Zulu Company?"

"That's right." Samuel said coolly.

"Greetings, Demons!" A deep voice called from somewhere behind them. Jason turned to see the two Sangheili, U'svere and Ahrmonro, standing in a doorway with a pair of ONI officers.

"You!" Zeke shouted immediately and stepped forward. "Where is my armor?"

The silver-armored Elite laughed. "We have both sets of armor." He said, clicking his mandibles. "And I'm sure that you will be pleased with the enhancements."

"I'm sure I'd have been more pleased if I'd had it back before I had to trek through a blizzard." Zeke growled. A second later, he'd regained his composure. "Take Vic and I to them," he paused, and then added painfully, "please."

"In a moment, Demon," Ahrmonro said. "There is something that you must know first." He motioned to the ONI operative that had greeted them.

"This is Captain Scott Ward," Agnes said. "He's a good friend of mine who helps me maintain security and, overall, oversee the ship." He laughed. "Oh, and he's the one who 'beamed us up' as well."

"Yeah," Scott said, "that's me. But, sir, we have a problem." The man's face was suddenly deathly grim.

"What is it, Scott?"

"The Covenant fleet," he said, "they jumped earlier than we expected." He stopped, glancing around the room at the men and women working frantically at their computers. "HIGHCOM says that we're to be in orbit in less than eight hours. In ten, they'll exit Slipspace around 600,000 kilometers away from the planet."

Agnes' eyes widened. "I thought we had two days?"

"We thought we did. They jumped a few days ago and then exited Slipspace in a fashion that â€" to us â€" still looks completely random. No one thought that they'd jump again so soon." He laughed bitterly. "Hell, we don't even know why they exited in the first place."

"So we have ten hours?" Agnes asked, clarifying.

"That's right, sir." Ward said. "Ten hours, and then we get what we've been waiting for: the Atonement gets put to the test."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: So, what did you think? Nah, don't tell me here...please leave a review! This story, with this chapter, will top 200,000 words, a real landmark for me! I would be in awe if I could top 300 reviews on the same chapter (please?). So, if you haven't reviewed up 'til now, or if you've been a loyal readerreviewer for any length of time, please, drop me a line! Tell me what you thought about this new ship, about the Atonement of Reach! I promise, the space-battle will be of the stuff Halo legends are made of, lol. Remember Keyes' big battle with the Covenant? Perhaps the glassing of Reach itself? This is it, folks. I won't say that I can compete with the First Battle of Earth or the Battle of Reach, but I'll tell you right now that I'm gonna try!\*\*

\*\*So, if you liked anything up above, or if you'd like more information about any of the ship's weapons, shielding, etc...let me know, and I'll make a point to have it explained next-chapter. I'm particularly interested in what you all will think of this new MAC Gun. I know, 4-percent to 55-percent is a quantum-leap, perhaps one that seems too great, but I want it that way. I want to show that adoption of Sangheili and Covenant technology could propel the UNSC

into an era of powerful weapons, starships of untold power, and one last chance at - maybe - winning this war.\*\*

\*\*So, questions, comments: feel free to review, and I would very much appreciate any that I get, as always. Next chapter, the enhancements will be revealed. The war in space will begin. The UNSC will draw the line in solar system and hold it against the incoming Covenant fleet. Without the assistance of the MAC Guns, the Atonement will be left to deal with these twenty incoming alien ships with only a handful of the UNSC's starships at its side. How will it all play out? Well, that's for me to know, and for you to read. ;) Thanks again for reading, everyone!\*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

#### 41. Chapter 40: Anxious Moments

\*\*Author's Notes: Well, I know it's been a while, but I promise, I'll make it worth the wait. I've actually got two chapters ready for you all (this one, I know, is fairly short, but the other one (the good one) is about 9,000 words of action for you to bite into. Again, I apologize. The first one (this one) gave me major headaches and I couldn't get it to come out how I wanted it. You want Writer's Block? THIS was Writer's Block. The next one...well, you'll just have to see it once I get this posted.\*\*

\*\*First, Reviews (I got a LOT for the last one, thank you all very much!):\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Yep, we finally got it ready and rearing to go! Thanks again for all your help on it, and I hope you like the upcoming war in the depths of space. The Atonement's gonna kick some serious Covenant tail. Haha! Hail the Atonement of Reach!\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey! I'm glad you liked the comedy from the last one. Sorry for the wait...I promise, it'll be worth it.\*\*

\*\*hellhound cerberus: Wow! I'm glad to see so much excitement about the new ship. I promise to make it worth your wait. Also, Magnus...well, he'll be back. Those who like him will get a small taste here in this chapter.\*\*

\*\*vernox: Hey, I promise I didn't stop! lol. Still, I'm betting you're caught up by now...it took me weeks this time around, lol. Still, I hope you like what's finally ready. Thanks for your review!!\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: Wow, with as excited as you were for the Atonement, I feel guilty I took so long to get this next bit out. My bad, my friend. I'll try not to let Writer's Block kick my butt too much anymore, lol. Still, let's hope it's everything you were looking forward to.\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: Hey! Good to see that the Atonement passed inspection. I'm glad it lived up to expectations. As for Agnes...well...his character has some quirks that I may or may not exploit later on. We'll just have to see. His backstory...well,

again...quirks. Sorry for the mystery, but I'm glad you liked the bit with Zeke and the ONI ops. He has fun with those types of meetings.\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: Wow, long review! That's okay, I like those! First, Zeke's bit...you might find out later. If not, assume it was just the usual threatening language that we've grown accustomed to. As for the Atonement: the docking bays are located near the front of the ship, where the bridge is. No worries on an "evacuation." I promise. Secondly, it's a completely new ship. Sorry for the confusion. McDonald's: I've decided that they do, lol. Magnus...will be very, very dangerous to the Covies when he returns. In regards to Zeke: you'll see his augmentations here, and you'll find that, when it comes to intriguing conversations or events...he tends to keep to himself. Thanks for reviewing and sorry for the delay!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Hey! Glad you liked the Atonement! And also, I'd like to tell you that I've decided to take your advice. When this story is finished, I will work on a "side-story" detailing Magnus' life from the time he is taken by ONI to the time he returns to Zulu Company, and up through the end of this book, which you will see soon. So thank you very, very much for the great idea! As for Zeke and Vic...well, they each have their faults. Zeke takes pride in his ability to irritate ONI spooks (and most anyone else). Victoria...well, she just has bad memories...as I can sympathize with...since I'm the one making them, lol. ;) \*\*

\*\*Mhop12: Thanks! ;) \*\*

\*\*islandhopper700: lol, no cliffhangers for the most part. I avoid them when I can. Thanks very much for taking the time to review, and, in answer to your question: the "new" Magnus...I'm tossing around having him EAT Hunters. jk, but you get the idea. ;) \*\*

\*\*AosUnderSol: Thanks for the compliments! I'm glad you like the new ship. As for Magnus, I PROMISE, he will return soon. And everyone will marvel. hehe.\*\*

\*\*Lecter42: Wow, hard questions, lol. Let me take these one at a time:

>(1) The mass of the MAC round doesn't change a whole lot (actually, only by a few hundred tons), but the kinetic energy that it possesses changes dramatically, allowing it to do things the original MAC round couldn't dream of. I've got the equation (given to me by Samson00) somewhere.<br>(2) The Pulse Generator doesn't actually disrupt the plasma, only the magnetic fields generated by Covenant starships to guide and control and constrict it. So, when it does, the plasma disperses and is rendered ineffective and can even pre-detonate it.

>(3) I honestly have no idea how you would contain antimatter. The Covenant did it in their bombs. I would imagine they used magnetic fields (as they use them for everything else), but I have no idea exactly how. If Bungie ever releases info as to how they did it, I'll know as well. For now, assume that the Atonement mimics Covenant Antimatter Bombs on an enormous scale.  
>Still, thanks very much for your review, and I hope you like what is to come!<strong>

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Thanks! I'm really happy with the reaction I got to the Atonement. It's great! And, in answer to question, yes, Zeke can always get cooler. ;) Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*K.I.A. Kal:** Thanks a lot! I'm glad everyone really likes it!\*\*

**\*\*Samus 117:** lol, thanks! It seems like everyone loves Magnus. Still, he'll be back. Also, what did you mean by "what happened to Vic?" Do you mean in the lab? Or...forgive me...puzzled. Still, thanks for your review, and I love your username (I'm a big Metroid fan).\*\*

**\*\*Bashbro:** Hey! Long time no see! I'm glad you're still enjoying it! Hope to hear from you more often, eh?? ;) \*\*

**\*\*Lord Zander:** Well, first off, I'm sorry you had such a problem sticking with it early on. Is there any reason that you could give me? Something to improve perhaps? Also, I don't know about female Elites. I know they EXIST...but I have no idea how to portray one, so I leave it up to those who have done a good job already (a couple names come to mind off the top of my head). Also, Zeke and Blaine seem to be crowd favorites. And yes, the Hammer VS Chopper does work...I've done it. ;) Of course, which Hammer VS Chopper thing were you mentioning, exactly? Blaine goes to town on them, and you never know which scenario you're gonna see. :) Thanks for reviewing, and I hope to hear from you again!\*\*

**\*\*Thanks again to EVERYONE who reviewed and helped me hit my 300-review goal for this last chapter. I really, really appreciate it! And, with that, I give you the next chapter!\*\***

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 40:<strong>

â€" **\*\*Anxious Moments** â€" \*\*

**\*\*0700 Hours - February 1, 2553\*\***

**\*\*Aboard the UNSC \_Atonement Of Reach\_ - Argentina\*\***

Everyone in the group was dead-silent for a long time. The armored Spartans were completely still, each one waiting for whatever orders the Vice Admiral would present them with. The Sangheili were calm and collected, as always. Victoria seemed anxious, like her mind was racing but her voice was quiet. Even Ezekiel was hushed in the grim ambience.

"Alright," Agnes said finally, apparently having contemplated the situation to its full extent. He turned to Samuel and the rest of the Spartans. "There's not a lot left to be done on-board the ship. I know that the seven of you haven't slept since before you left Albuquerque, so I would recommend that you go and get some sleep. We've got about eight hours."

"Yes sir," Samuel said without a moment's hesitation. Blaine rolled his eyes behind his visor and heard Ezekiel scoff behind

him.

"Sounds good to me," Victoria said happily. "I'm dead-tired. A few hours of sleep sounds perfect." Samuel nodded to her, and she turned to leave.

"Not yet, Demon," Ahrmonro said, stopping her. When she turned, he said, "you must come and see the work done to your armor." He turned to Ezekiel. "And you as well."

Zeke scowled. "It's about time." He said. "Let's go."

"Hold it, you two," Samuel said. "The Vice Admiral is right; as soon as you finish checking, I want you to get some sleep. We'll be boarding a Covenant Assault Carrier in a matter of hours, and I want everyone at top shape."

"Got it," Victoria said.

"Why?" Zeke protested. "This isn't kindergarten, and I don't do nap-time!"

"Just do as you're told," Samuel said, "just this once, do as I ask and don't make me pull rank for the third time today."

Blaine grinned. "Night, Zeke." He mocked, waving at the smaller Spartan.

Ezekiel scowled. "The Hellâ€¦" he started, and then drifted off as the two Sangheili led him and Victoria from the room.

"Now, the rest of you," Samuel said, looking around the group. Before he could continue, Landon interrupted.

"I slept on the Pelican." He said. "I think Jason and I would be much better off if we stayed up here on the bridge. Maybe we can learn some things about what's on this ship, what this new MAC is capable of, or what we can expect from the Covenant, or-"

Samuel put his hands up defensively. "Alright, alright," he said. "The two of you can stay up here. However, you so much as blink for too long when we board that ship, and I'll see to it that you never drive another vehicle as long as you live. Comprene?"

Both Spartans nodded.

"What about you?" Samuel asked as he turned to face Stephanie.

"I'm with Vic," she said. "I'm beat. I'll be curled up in a corner somewhere. Call me if you need me." Samuel nodded, and she too left the room.

Blaine knew what was coming.

"Alright," Samuel said, "I know I can't expect you to actually listen if I tell you to go and get some sleep, so could you at least do me a favor and not get into any major trouble?"

Blaine smiled. "Honestly," he said, "who do you take me for, Zeke?"

Samuel shook his head. "I'll have a similar talk with him before it's over. For now, I'm talking to you. Do what you want; just don't do anything that'll come back to bite me when it's all over."

Blaine nodded. "You got it, Sam. No trouble? No problem."

\* \* \*

><p>"Is there a reason you put our suits as far away from the bridge as humanly possible?" Ezekiel asked bitterly. "Or do you just enjoy making us walk all over Hell and back?"<p>

U'svere clicked his mandibles. A few weeks ago, he'd have been immeasurably annoyed at the human. Now, however, he'd grown used to it, and it was just another part of the job. "We're nearly there, Demon." He said, following Ahrmonro as the Field Master led them down a long corridor that would lead them into the fourth "segment" of the ship.

They walked in silence for the last few minutes, until Ahrmonro stopped at a door marked "Authorized Personnel Only" and pushed it open. U'svere followed, leading the two humans inside the small room.

Two steps into the room, and the SpecOps Elite heard the female, Victoria, gasp behind him. "Wow," she said, stunned. The other, Ezekiel, was silent.

"I hope you're as fond of the technology as we are, Demons." Ahrmonro said, motioning to the two MJOLNIR suits. They were up against the wall, but completely devoid of color. More so, they were transparent, almost completely invisible to the naked eye. It was only because of the room's lights â€" angled in a specific manner â€" that the two sets of armor could be distinguished from the walls behind them.

"Active Camo," Ezekiel said. U'svere was surprised to see the Spartan actually smiling, though his eyes were still hidden behind a pair of what the humans called "sunglasses."

"Oh yeah," Victoria said with a dangerous look in her eyes. "The Brutes are in for it now. They could barely find us before." She let out a short, mischievous laugh.

"It is not perfect, humans." U'svere interjected. "Like the camouflage that we as Sangheili are permitted to use in battle, it will use the energy from your shields. This particular system is the equivalent of what a Special Operations Elite would use."

"That doesn't make sense." Victoria answered. "I thought that, when a SpecOps Elite activated Active Camo, that it had no effect on the shields."

U'svere spread his jaws wide, a close equivalent to a human sigh, but Ahrmonro answered before he could. "The camouflage takes its energy from our shields as well, Spartan." He said. "Many of our lowest-ranking brothers, including the Stealth Elites, have cloaking systems that drain their shields to nothing. As high-ranking soldiers or commanders, our shields are stronger than your own already. Using

Active Camouflage reduces the shields, but does not eliminate them."

The female Spartan nodded, understanding. "Okay," she said, still staring at her armor on the wall.

"So what are the technicalities to these enhancements?" Ezekiel asked. "How long will it last and how much will it sap our shields, most importantly?"

U'svere cocked his head, trying to do an exact calculation. "Your shields will be reduced to roughly one-fourth of their full capacity while the Active Camouflage is in effect. In addition, the technology will cloak you for as long as you need, provided that you neither attack nor are attacked."

The Spartan staggered backwards slightly. "You're telling me that we can stay virtually invisible for as long as we need to?"

"Not quite," Ahrmonro corrected. He looked to U'svere, and then back at the two humans. "Originally, U'svere would be correct. However, your shield systems are actually sub-standard for your Spartan-level armor."

"You mean the MJOLNIR armor?"

"Yes," the Field Master said. "Because of this, the camouflage will work for only about ten to twelve seconds before it will have completely drained your shields and will begin to short out."

"Damn it." Zeke cursed. "We could've done some real damage with that."

"I have no fear that you will not still wreak a great deal of havoc, Spartan." U'svere said. "It seems to be a specialty of your team."

Victoria nodded, laughing quietly. "That's right." She said. "We're a walking disasterâ€|at least, if you're Covenant."

"Well," Ahrmonro said, "I am sorry to inform you of this, but your suits are not completely ready. Each AI is doing final system checks, executing tests and looking for potential problems with the camouflage."

"What!" Zeke shouted. "They're still not ready!"

"I promise you, Spartan," U'svere said, "if you go and rest as your commander instructed, they will both be ready by the time you awaken."

After much scowling and cursing, the two Spartans turned and left the room.

"The female is very kind," Ahrmonro said in a detached tone. "But the otherâ€|"

"He isâ€|outspoken." U'svere finished, copying what Victoria had told him once during sparring about the other Spartan. He chose not to voice the other words and nicknames that the female had used.



\* \* \*

><p>Samuel walked down the long, maze-like hallways of the <em>Atonement</em> in complete silence. His mind wandered inevitably back and forth between the upcoming battle and his Spartans aboard the ship. A few of them might sleep, sure, but the restâ€|

He shook his head. \_As if they would ever just curl up and take a nap.\_ He thought, imagining Ezekiel, Blaine, Landon, and Jason.

After a few more minutes, it suddenly dawned on the giant Spartan how tired he really was. He realized that he had been awake for well-over twenty-four hours, and hadn't even slept well the night before the men from ONI had arrived in Albuquerque. Finally, he reached a door marked "MESS HALL" and stepped inside.

As expected, there were multiple rows of identical tables, food-dispensing machines along the walls, and the unmistakable odor of half-eaten meals thrown into trash cans, creating a terrible concoction of what â€" to Samuel â€" seemed like almost noxious fumes.

"I think I'd rather breathe out of a Grunt's methane tank," he muttered, walking through the room and exiting through a door on the other side.

Again, he found a long, empty corridor.

"Oh, come on," Samuel whispered harshly. "All I need is a closed room and space to lie down. Is that too much to ask?"

\* \* \*

><p>Somewhere far below the other Spartans and the Sangheili, Blaine was conducting his own thorough exploration of the ship. He'd been to all four of the Launch Bays so far, in addition to three of the Armories and a Cryo Storage Area. Still, he hadn't found anything remotely interesting.<p>

Blaine scowled as he walked up to a large, Covenant-style doorway, only to find it glowing red. To top it off, there was a small keypad next to the door.

"This sucks." He said, and turned to walk away. For as long as he'd been wandering the ship, it seemed pathetic to him that he'd only entered about a dozen rooms. These rooms, originally, had doors that were shining in blood-red light, but the security cameras mounted outside had gotten one look at his MJOLNIR armor and opened them right up.

In regards to the fifty other doors he'd come toâ€|well, that was another story altogether.

Checking his Heads-Up Display, Blaine found another Armory located only a few hundred yards toward the back of the ship and decided simply that, when in doubt, go see what ONI has been up to in the weapons-department.

Blaine's problem was that, unlike some of the other Spartans, he normally wasn't content to just randomly "get some rest" or to watch a bunch of ONI scientists put the finishing touches on some tiny, seemingly-pointless piece of equipment. Now, that's not to say that he didn't have a tremendous respect for science and its miracles, especially considering that his biomechanical structure was a gift given to him exclusively by the progress of brilliant science. He just preferred to do his "scientific testing" on the battlefield with a truckload of Brutes on the receiving end.

The white-armored Spartan knew that he was no Samuel either. The man could take orders from the most arrogant, abusive superior and "provided his team wasn't put in jeopardy" he could follow them to a "T" without a single qualm. This was one trait that Blaine would reluctantly admit to sharing with Ezekiel. Neither of them had much tolerance for idiocy, ignorance, or being pushed around.

Blaine stopped at the door to the Armory, allowing the camera mounted above it to get a good look at him. A second later, the alien-constructed doors slid open, and he walked quickly inside, leaving his thoughts in the corridor behind him.

"Now, let's see what we can find in here." He thought aloud, glancing back and forth. The room was simple: a large square with four sets of giant shelves, one on each wall, and a set of giant lockers in the middle, facing the door. The only other thing adorning the room was a large red and white target on the right-hand wall, probably for nothing more than decoration.

On the wall to the Spartan's left sat all heavy weapons, including Fuel Rod Cannons, Beam Rifles, Rocket Launchers (as well as both HEAT and ANACONDA-class rockets), and UNSC Sniper Rifles of three different breeds. In addition, awkward-looking support weapons were stored on the lowermost shelves. A half-dozen Missile Pods, Heavy Machine Guns, Covenant Plasma Cannons, and even a pair of Flamethrowers decorated the long shelf.

"I think I could get used to this," Blaine mused, glancing around. There were Shotguns, Energy Swords, SMGs, Assault Rifles, Battle Rifles, Carbines and every kind of grenade lining the walls around him. The white-armored Spartan looked for several minutes before something caught his eye.

In one of the lockers at the middle of the room, a half-dozen rifle-like weapons were hanging snugly, held by Velcro straps. They looked similar to the UNSC Battle Rifle, but were colored more of a dark-blue, and the barrel was all wrong. It was thick and completely smooth. As a matter of fact, the whole weapon was so sleek that, to Blaine, it seemed ridiculously obsessive.

"What the Hell are you?" He mumbled under his breath questioningly as he picked one up and examined it. It looked almost Covenant in design, but, somehow, Blaine didn't think so. He'd never seen an alien weapon with a UNSC-style scope mounted to the top.

The Spartan searched for a magazine, a bolt, or any moving part, for that matter, but couldn't find a single one, albeit the trigger, of course. He couldn't even find a battery mounted anywhere on the weapon. Curious, he lifted it up and took aim at the target hanging on the wall. He peered through the scope, sighted the center of the

boardâ€|

And thought better of it.

As a Spartan, common sense told him that, regardless of its appearance, firing a weapon about which he knew nothing could end badly. Instead, he put the gun carefully back in the locker and immediately left the room, heading towards the bridge.

The white-armored Spartan only made it about thirty meters, however, when the title of another room caught his attention.

\* \* \*

><p>"This is just great." Victoria muttered as she walked hastily down what she believed to be her eighth seemingly-endless hallway in the <em>Atonement<em>. "Just great," she finished bitterly.

After leaving both the Sangheili and Ezekiel, she had immediately looked for somewhere to take a power-nap. Unfortunately, everywhere she went, she found that there were ONI operatives giving her a combination of hateful, deceptive, and mysterious glares and looks.

And now, she couldn't sleep.

As she walked, she tried to talk herself out of it, mumbling things like how foolish it was for her â€" a Spartan â€" to be nervous just because of a few ONI soldiers. The closest many of them had come to seeing a true Covenant soldier, she thought, had likely been in a book or over a video-feed. Still, that did little to improve her uneasiness.

\_This is stupid,\_ she thought as she wandered the massive ship aimlessly. \_I need to find something to get my mind on something else.\_

Not knowing what else to do, she entered the first door she came to, marked "VIEWING GLASS." She stood completely still in front of the room's camera, waiting for it to finish scanning her image. Suddenly, she imagined looking outside the ship, seeing the mountains and the snow and the-

The door opened, and her hopes crashed.

The room that had opened to her was nothing but a narrow walkway with a wall on one side and, on the other, a glass viewing window that looked down on what appeared to be a gym or workout station below.

And, in that gym, Blaine was lying flat on a platform, benching what looked to be the weight of at least two Warthogs. At the other end of the room, Ezekiel had activated his Energy Sword and appeared to be sparring by himself, swinging the thing around madly and frightening the four "normal" soldiers that were also in the room.

Victoria shrugged and decided to pay the other Spartans a visit. Hopefully, being around them would ease her nerves a bit.

After a five-minute excursion to find an elevator, Victoria took it

and emerged one level below. She retraced the same steps that she'd made upstairs and found the door to the gym with ease.

"Okay," she said, standing still and waiting for the camera to scan her. It took her nearly twenty seconds of perfect silence to realize that, in contrast to all the other doors that the Spartan had come to, this one was already blue, and that there was no camera.

\_Oh wow,\_ she thought, shaking her head, \_I really am tired.\_

She stepped inside and saw that the Marines had all gathered around Blaine at the bench, blocking him from her view. Ezekiel was sitting against one wall with his eyes closed. She smiled.

"Out like a light," she whispered, suppressing a laugh. She turned to go and see what Blaine was up to, but was interrupted.

"What are you doing here, Vic?" Ezekiel asked without moving.

Victoria was puzzled. His eyes were still completely shut. "How'd you know it wa-"

"Everyone's got their own disgusting scent, Vic." He said, "even you."

"Oh," she said, stopped cold by the comment. For once, she had nothing to say in retort. All she could do was stand there, eyes wide and her mouth slightly open.

"Although," Zeke added almost painfully, "there are far worse scents than yours. I suppose that counts for something."

Victoria was about to respond when she heard the Marines start yelling and jeering, laughing in between random taunts. She ran over to where Blaine was and then stumbled backwards at the sight.

The Spartan had a titanium bar in his hands and as many large, circular weights on each side as the bar would fit. Victoria read the engraved writing on the outermost weight and saw the words "750 KILOGRAMS." She tried to measure the load on each side, but stopped when she realized that the right side alone was carrying more than 3000 pounds.

"Come on, Robo!" One of the Marines shouted. "Push!"

"Yeah," another jeered, "what's wrong, tin-can?"

Blaine was in full-armor, so Victoria couldn't see his face, but she knew that he'd put more weight on the bar than he was used to, because his arms were "very slowly" beginning to fall down to his chest. He pushed and his chest and arms lifted slightly, but it wasn't enough to move the bar.

"Oh! He's done!" One of the soldiers said while standing just behind Blaine's head, as if he was supposed to be spotting the soldier. He leaned over, so that he was hovering above the bar and looking down at the Spartan. "You want some help, little man?"

CRACK!

Blaine's arms pushed forward and released the bar so quickly that Victoria barely had time to register it before the titanium rod had covered the distance between the Spartan and the Marine's head. The poor man had only enough time to tilt his head upwards before the bar crashed into his chin, hitting him with just enough power to crack bones and send the soldier staggering back, stuttering curses as a mixture of blood and broken teeth fell from his mouth.

And, as he did so, the bar fell back down, where Blaine caught it easily, and stood up. He turned around to face the other three soldiers, holding the bar at his waist.

"Oh shit!" one of them yelled. It was the same one that had given him the nickname "Robo" only a few seconds before.

"No hard feelings," Blaine said happily. "Here, catch!" He braced himself and then motioned like he would throw the several-ton bar at the soldiers, who immediately took off, sprinting for the door.

The last one, who was still bleeding and whose whole face appeared to be swelling, was right behind them.

"Now, you know-" Victoria managed, but Blaine cut her off, lowering the bar and dropping it calmly on the floor.

"What do you think, Zeke?" He asked tauntingly. "You wanna come over here and put this away for me?" Blaine grabbed the bar, and then pretended to be unable to lift it.

The other Spartan didn't even answer. He raised his right hand, balled it into a fist, and then extended one finger.

Blaine began to laugh, the sound muffled terribly by his MJOLNIR helmet. "Oh, you're no fun at all." He said.

"What's the point in lifting anyway?" Ezekiel growled. "You're cybernetic. You don't use your strength; you use the implants."

"You're just jealous." Blaine said, lifting his arms up and flexing them, though it couldn't show through the armor. A second later, he lifted the bar, and set it back on the bench.

"You're leaving?" Victoria asked. Blaine nodded.

"I was on my way to the bridge before I stopped in. I'm gonna go see about some weapons I found in the Armory about a half-hour ago." He raised his hand. "See ya."

And, with that, he left. Ezekiel scoffed loudly.

"What's with you?" Victoria asked.

"Me?" he asked, glancing up. "What about you? You're the one who stepped into the gym and didn't do anything but watch. I thought you were getting some beauty sleep."

"I said I was getting some rest." She answered, eyes narrowed. "I didn't say a thing about beauty sleep." She paused as the other

Spartan looked up.

Ignoring her bait, he answered, "I was under the impression that was what females called it." And then, before she could respond, he added, "and now I ask again: what the Hell are you doing here, anyway?"

Victoria sighed. "I couldn't sleep." She admitted.

"Becauseâ€|?"

The female Spartan heaved another deep breath, her eyes downcast. Of all the Spartans to admit this to, Ezekiel was not on the top of her list. "The soldiers from the Office of Naval Intelligence," she said, "they make me nervous. I don't have my armor. I don't have Gael. I think that, if I fell asleep here on the ship, I might not wake up here."

Zeke rolled his eyes with a smirk, but nodded and said nothing.

"I'm not scared of them." She protested. "I just don't want to let my guard down around them. After what happened last timeâ€|" She trailed off.

"You need to sleep." The other Spartan said. "You'll be useless when we board the Prophet's ship." He paused, thinking. Suddenly, an unusual expression overtook his face. It was almost friendly. "What if I'm here in the room, and I'm awake?"

Victoria was shocked. "You'd do that?" She asked, "for me?"

Instantly, his countenance was rock-solid and ice-cold. "Don't flatter yourself. I had no intentions of sleeping anyway. The logic is this: if you're too tired to board the ship with the rest of us, Sam will send someone else to partner up with me, and I'll have to slow down for them to keep up." He scoffed. "Just shut your eyes, shut your ears, and â€" most importantly â€" shut your mouth, and get some sleep."

Victoria smiled. Somewhere in there, there was a show of actual compassion. She sat down several feet from the other soldier and shut her eyes, grinning.

"And wipe that stupid grin off your face." Zeke growled, but she ignored him, focusing instead on getting some sleep.

\* \* \*

><p>"So, what does this Covenant fleet look like?" Jason asked the Vice Admiral. Landon, Agnes and himself had been standing in silence, watching the terminals for nearly an hour, and it seemed like a worthwhile question.<p>

"We're not entirely sure," he admitted, "but we have a general idea. Given that there are twenty of them in all, we're expecting seven Covenant Frigates, five Destroyers, a couple of Carriers, probably four or five CCS Battlecruisers, and then the Assault Carrier that the Prophet will likely be on, according to the Sangheili."

"Can we handle all that?" Landon asked. Agnes smiled.

"Trust me," he said, "the \_Atonement\_ will do just fine." He turned to the Spartans. "The important thing is that, when we do engage them and neutralize the majority of their forces, your team can ship out and board their Capital Ship. After thatâ€¦I'm afraid you'll be on your own."

Jason smiled. "That's the way we like it, sir."

\* \* \*

><p>Victoria walked slowly down the darkened hallway. Only a few minutes before, she'd looked around the gym to see Ezekiel gone and the lights turned off. The female Spartan was furious. She'd kill him when she found him. Telling her that he'd stay, and then just vanishingâ€¦<p>

A bright, green light at the end of the hallway interrupted her thoughts. It wasn't coming from her hall, however, but a door. As she got closer, the intensity of the burning light forced her to squint until her eyes were nothing but narrow slits.

Suddenly, a terrifying thought entered her mind. What if, instead of her, someone from the Office of Naval Intelligence had taken another Spartan this time? What if it was Ezekiel, and that's why he wasn't with her? Instantly, she broke into a dead-sprint, covering the horribly long corridor in less than ten seconds.

She reached the end and rounded the corner-

And she stopped.

The light had dimmed and, inside the room, stood a soldier in MJOLNIR armor with his back to her. The Spartan was about Samuel's size, perhaps slightly larger. The armor was colored dark green and had chinks and cuts in it that Victoria presumed were battle-scars. She stepped forward, but the Spartan turned around to face her.

"Victoria," a male voice said.

She couldn't believe it. There was no way. He was dead. "Magnus?" she asked, puzzled. The Spartan nodded.

"The one and only," he said with a laugh.

\_Victoria!\_ A voice shouted in her mind. \_Victoria!\_

She was confused. Her armor was off, so Gael couldn't be speaking to her. Who then, was shouting?

\_Get the Hell up! Our armor's ready!\_

She opened her eyes and saw Ezekiel standing over her, shaking her with one hand. "Let's go!" He said, and she noticed U'svere standing behind him. "They're finally done."

"How long was I out?" She asked groggily.

The other Spartan laughed. "About six hours," he said. "You sleep like a rock. Now come on; I'm sick and tired of being in dress-clothes."

Slowly, Victoria got to her feet, thinking of the dream she'd just had. Was that really Magnus? More importantly, why did appear in her mind after being gone so long? It certainly wasn't like she'd been thinking about him or ONI when she fell asleep. It didn't make any sense. And, to add to that, what was the bright, green light?

"What's eating you?" Zeke asked. Victoria shook her head.

"Nothing," she said. "Not a thing."

\* \* \*

><p>Thirty minutes later, the seven Spartans were gathered once more on the bridge with Vice Admiral Agnes and the crew of the <em>Atonement of Reach<em>. All the supplies had been gathered, and the ship was preparing to depart the Earth's surface and head for orbit. They had less than three hours before the Covenant were scheduled to depart from Slipspace.

"Before we head for space," Agnes said, looking coldly around the room at the two-dozen Marines and, specifically, ONI operatives gathered around, "you should all know that Zulu Company, while they do not technically outrank you, are to be treated as guests aboard my ship. They've shown respect since they boarded, but do not command it from you. I, however, do. They'll be doing the hard part of this assignment, the part that none of us would dare to attempt. They'll be boarding a Covenant Assault Carrier, armed with God-only-knows how many of those damned aliens, and they'll be doing it alone."

He paused, looking around as if waiting for one of the operatives to challenge his decree. While, to Jason, they all looked extremely angry, none of them were upset enough to break protocol and voice it.

"These Spartans are going straight into the bowels of Hell," Agnes continued, "and they're doing it so that we don't have to. I'd tell you to treat them like dignitaries, like royalty while they're on this ship, but I don't think they want that. So, instead, I'm telling you all this: until they leave this ship, the members of Zulu Company are to be treated like your fellow soldiers." He took a quick glance around, and then dismissed all of the unnecessary personnel from the bridge.

"Thank you, sir," Samuel said. "That wasn't necessary, but we do appreciate the courtesy."

Agnes shook his head. "It was necessary." He said, and then looked at Blaine. "I had a report come to me saying that you broke a Marine's jaw with the workout-bar." The Vice Admiral started to laugh at the mention of it.

"Yes sir," Blaine said, lowering his head slightly.

"Rise up, soldier," Agnes said. "I got that report and the first



thing I asked was "well, what the Hell did he do to provoke him?" Needless to sayâ€¦I got the whole story."

"You broke a guy's jaw?" Jason asked, stunned.

"You broke a guy's jaw?" Samuel repeated bitterly.

"It was an accident." Blaine said. "The bar got away from me." When Sam continued to look at him, he added defensively, "that thing was heavy."

"Uh-huh," Samuel said, shaking his head.

Before the conversation could continue, a loud voice echoed all around the bridge through a set of loudspeakers. "Everybody suit up, sit down, and get ready! We are leaving the planet in five minutes."

Jason took a deep breath. Blaine glanced toward him and then seemed to zone out.

"And so it begins." He said.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Don't worry! I wasn't terribly fond of this chapter either. But, that's why I have another one that will be posted just as soon as I can get it uploaded (it's DONE, lol). So, expect it in...well, less than a half-hour, lol.<strong>

\*\*ALSO, BIG NOTE: I'm putting up a poll in my profile where you can vote on your favorite Zulu Company Spartan. If ANYONE who reads this would do so, I would be very, very appreciative! I just wanna see who wins out, lol. Thanks all!\*\*

## 42. Chapter 41: Drawing The Lines

\*\*Author's Notes: Hey, I told you I'd have a second one!\*\*

\*\*FIRST: There is a poll (previously mentioned) in my profile for your favorite Zulu Company Spartan...please vote for me! Thanks all!\*\*

\*\*Anyways, this one is where the fight really begins. Get ready for a space battle to shake the whole system. The Atonement Of Reach is ready and rearing to kick some Covenant tail. And don't worry: there will be some old-fashioned guns-and-swords fighting too while I'm at it. Promise.\*\*

\*\*So, I hope you all like this one as much as I did. I have you know: I'm working on the next one as we speak. And, I'm out of school, so expect some more speed on the posting. So, enjoy!\*\*

\*\*Also, last note: if you would be kind enough to review both this chapter and the last one (preferably separately for numbers, lol), I would appreciate it. If you only want to review once, that's okay too. Just know I'd like as many as possible. Though, in all, the input is more important than the digits. So, just please let me hear from all of you!\*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 41:<strong>

â€" \*\*Drawing The Lines â€" \*\*

\*\*1700 Hours - February 1, 2553\*\*

\*\*Aboard the UNSC \_Atonement Of Reach\_ - In Orbit\*\*

Stephanie was anxious and more than a little nervous. Through basic training, the Spartans had been shown pictures and video feed about what space was like, but she'd never actually been in it before. And she knew as well as any of the Spartans that orbit was not the place for soldiers like themselves.

"This is it," Victoria said to her through the MJOLNIR communications-link. "You rested and ready to go?"

Stephanie nodded. Nervous or not, she was more than ready to face the Covenant head-on. It'd been far too long. "I can't wait." She said.

"You won't be waiting much longer." Samuel said. "The \_Atonement\_ just released the space-probes. The Covenant will be exiting Slipspaceâ€|and soon."

"Let 'em come," Zeke's voice echoed in her helmet. "We'll put an end to this right now."

"Sir!" an ONI officer stationed at one terminal at the front of the bridge yelled, looking to Agnes. "We've got a rift being opened! It's six-hundred-thousand kilometers out!"

"Alright," Agnes said. "Get a link up and ready with the \_Ares\_, the \_Ulysses\_, and the \_Axis\_. It's show time, ladies and gentlemen!"

"What classes are those ships, sir?" Samuel asked.

"The UNSC \_Ares\_ is a Carrier. The \_Ulysses\_ and the \_Axis\_ are both Frigates that we had in orbit around Earth. Apparently the Orbital Defense Platforms aren't even able to cover us either. We're on our own."

Stephanie sighed. \_Of course we are.\_

"Sir, we've got visuals on the Covenant fleet!"

"Let me see 'em," Agnes said. A second later, a hologram of twenty large ships appeared in the center of the room, toward the ceiling. The Vice Admiral cursed under his breath.

"We were wrong, sir." The man that Agnes had earlier identified as Captain Scott Ward said, his face grim as death.

"I see that." Agnes said calmly. "Give me the new numbers."

"Sir," he said, "we've got seven Covenant Frigates, five Destroyers, three CCS Battlecruisers, three Covenant Carriers, a single Assault Carrier, and one we hadn't counted on: a Covenant Battleship."

"Damn it," Agnes muttered. "I was told that we had eliminated the last Battleship." He turned to the Spartans. "That just goes to show you: you want something done right? Do it yourself."

"The Covenant are in standard formation: the Frigates are in the front; the Destroyers are moving around behind them and already amassing small amounts of energy in their weapons. Directly behind them, the larger ships have yet to move." The female AI, Delilah, said over the speakers. "Orders, sir?"

"Load the first MAC round." The Vice Admiral answered quickly. "I want a piece of that Battleship to send home to HIGHCOM. Ready the Energy Projectors for immediate action as soon as the ship's power-supply recovers from the MAC. Let's strike them while we're still outside of their range."

"Yes sir!" Ward said. "You heard the man!" He yelled to the two-dozen Marines sitting at terminals all around the bridge. "Get your asses in gear! It's time to remind these bastards who they're dealing with!"

"Sir," another soldier said from Stephanie's left, addressing the Vice Admiral. "The Covenant have already launched the Seraph fighters."

"Radio the Ares." He said. "Tell them to turn loose the Longswords. We'll do the same with what we've got."

"Yes sir."

Captain Scott spoke up. "MAC round turbine at forty-percent of full power," he said, "we'll be ready to fire in fifty seconds."

Not ten seconds after the man spoke, all the lights on the ship began to flicker precariously. Stephanie glanced around nervously.

"Don't worry," Agnes said. "It's just the lights. All non-essential power is rerouted to the turbine for maximum charge. It's under control."

"Sir, MAC Gun is ready to go!"

At that second, the large holograms in the center of the room lit up in different colors, dependant upon what class of starship each one was. Frigates were green; Destroyers were red; Carriers were yellow; the CCS-class starships were white; the Assault Carrier was blue; and the Battleship was flashing a combination of yellow, orange and red. At the same time, the ships' individual names appeared above them.

"The Unforgiving Radiance, huh?" Agnes said with a hint of bitterness, looking at the Covenant Capital Ship. "Take aim at the Battleship."

A second later, "sir, we are locked."

Agnes took a deep breath. After a tense second's hesitation, he said calmly, "open fire."

\* \* \*

><p>Time seemed to slow down and then finally stop as Landon waited for the MAC Gun to fire. Finally, as soon as Agnes had given the order to fire, all of the <em>Atonement</em> was pitched into total darkness for about two seconds, and the whole ship rocked as the several-thousand-ton round was launched from the ship at better than half the speed of light.

No sooner had the lights come back on that, through the monitors scattered around the bridge, Landon watched as the MAC round tore first through a Covenant Frigate, blasting straight through the starboard side before cutting through the ship and exiting from the other side. It didn't stop there, however. The enormous, lightning-fast tungsten projectile sliced through the tail-end of a Covenant Destroyer before hitting the nose of the Battleshipâ€|

And gutting it, from end to end.

The entire scene took around one second to take place, but Landon was too busy watching the slow-motion video feeds on the monitors to think about their next offensive move. That single MAC round had eliminated a Frigate, which now had blossoms of fire and plasma detonating on all parts of its frame. It had basically incapacitated a Destroyer by cutting a hole clean through the back, where the engines were located.

And, to top it all, it had then proceeded to completely destroy a Covenant Capital Ship. The three-thousand-ton round had cut through the nose and all front-mounted weapons and kept going, traveling the length of the ship and no-doubt crashing through the starship's reactor. As it bored a burning hole out the back of the craft, the Battleship was already billowing fire from a hundred different holes.

\_That's not even right,\_ Landon thought with a wicked grin. He couldn't even fathom the power of this new weapon. From this point on, the rules in space would be different. \_Hell,\_ he thought with a laugh, \_the entire game will be different.\_

"Sir," Delilah said, "the ship's power-supply is back up to one-hundred-percent. The Energy Projectors are at eighty-percent charge and the Covenant fleet is five-hundred-sixty-thousand kilometers out." She paused, and then added thoughtfully, "also, you might like to know that they're altering their formation. Apparently the MAC gave them quite a scare."

Agnes squinted slightly. "What are they doing?"

"See for yourself." The AI answered, and the holograms re-appeared in the center of the room. "They're staggering."

Sure enough, none of the Covenant starships were placing themselves directly behind the Frigates, as they had been earlier. Apparently they'd gotten the message loud-and-clear: the new MAC Gun didn't give one damn what was in its way; its target was going to take a hit,

period.

"That's insane." Jason said. "One shot, and we changed their whole battle-formation." His voice served well to echo the thoughts of the other Spartans.

"Sir," the AI said, "the Energy Projectors are ready."

"Target the three Frigates in the center." Agnes said, looking at the holograms. "Aim each one at a ship that's not dead-center of their formation. Hammer them with the Projectors until they're finished, then center both guns and use the remaining energy on the middle ship."

"Yes sir." Delilah answered.

Agnes glanced at the Spartans. "The Frigates have just moved within range of our Projectors. As of now, the Destroyers and the larger ships aren't in range yet." He said, almost as if he was explaining himself. "We need t--"

"Vice Admiral," Delilah said.

"Yes?"

"The Ares has now released the last group of Longswords. In addition, the Ulysses and the Axis are in position to cover us if the Seraphs get by the fighters. Finally, Projectors are firing in ten."

"Good," Agnes said. "Radio the Ares; tell them to stay covered. We've only got a couple-dozen fighters on this ship, and there are a ton of those damned Seraphs flying around."

"Yes sir." Delilah waited, then began counting down.

"Fiveâ€¦fourâ€¦threeâ€¦twoâ€¦one--"

When the AI hit one, the front of the Atonement lit up in brilliant purple-white as the two enormous Energy Projectors fired simultaneously. Twin beams of super-accelerated atoms streamed through the empty space and collided with a pair of Frigates near the center of the Covenant formation.

At first, the shots appeared to do nothing to the alien starships. But, after several seconds under constant pressure from the burning streams of energy, each ship's shields began to flicker and die. Two seconds later, two Covenant Frigates exploded in a shower of flame and metal, their reactors fried by the Atonement's guns.

And then, as instructed, the AI turned the twin guns on the unlucky Frigate between the two ships, which were now nothing more than drifting scrap and billowing fire. Having already had its shields hit by the explosions of the crafts on either side of it, the third Frigate, under pressure from both guns, ruptured almost instantly, detonating in a series of brutal explosions that started at the nose and ended no sooner than the tail of the ship.

Instantly, the two Projectors shut down.

"Three more down," Blaine said calmly.

"A lot left to go," Jason scowled. "And we're not going to be outside their range for much longer."

Agnes smiled. "Well," he said, "I didn't think we'd be fighting the whole battle from safety. After all, where's the fun in that?" He glanced up at the holograms again, which had changed to reflect the reduced number of Covenant ships. "Delilah, status."

"The Atonement is at one-hundred-percent capacity." The AI answered. "I'm running a continuous diagnostic, and we have no errors thus far. In regards to the Covenant—" The AI trailed off.

"Yes?" Agnes asked, watching the holograms.

"One of the Destroyers is moving forward and amassing energy in its Plasma Torpedo Launchers. Making calculations—" The AI stopped for several seconds, thinking. Even as she did so, the Covenant Destroyer fired, two bolts of plasma erupting from it and streaking toward the Atonement. "Scenario scanned. With your permission, activating Pulse Generator in twenty-three seconds," she finished.

"Permission granted." The Vice Admiral said without a second's hesitation. "Warn me before you activate it, Delilah. Apart from that, you've got control of our defenses."

"Yes sir." She answered. At that moment,

"Sir!" a Marine sitting in the corner of the room yelled suddenly.

"What is it?" Agnes asked. Before the soldier could answer, Delilah started the countdown.

"Pulse Generator online in five—four—three—two—one—"

\* \* \*

><p>Once again, the bridge went completely dark, apart from the individual monitors mounted to the walls of the room. Even the holograms vanished for a few moments. Samuel felt static electricity crackle and buzz for a split-second around his suit as the Atonement launched its enormous magnetic wave.

Sam watched in awe as the invisible wave struck the two torpedoes, causing one to detonate and disperse in the empty space and destroying the magnetic field holding the other in place. It too dispersed slightly, becoming nothing but a thin layer of superheated energy. As expected, it impacted with the Atonement's hull, but wasn't nearly enough to do any noticeable damage.

And then, within seconds, the lights and power returned to the ship.

"It worked!" One Marine yelled from his terminal. "It worked just like we planned it to!"

"Well of course it did." Agnes said with a grin. "The Atonement's not about to burn over one of their damned torpedoes." And again, he

turned to the holograms.

"Sir!" the Marine who had yelled before the Pulse Generator had activated spoke up again. "You need to see this!"

"Put it in the holographic panel." Agnes said patiently.

Five seconds later, the floating images changed, instead becoming a giant, digital representation of the Atonement with dozens of small fighters — both alien and human — zooming around it. In addition, there were two small ships, slightly larger than Covenant Seraphs, which were drifting extremely close to the Atonement's port and starboard sides. The Point-Defense Guns were aiming for nearby Seraphs, but ignoring the two alien crafts.

At first, Samuel didn't understand what he was looking at. But, then, a Marine spoke up, and he immediately knew. "Are those-?"

"Oh, shit." Blaine interrupted. His words were tense, but his voice was completely cold—emotionally flat-lined. They were more out of habit than actual concern.

Agnes started to contact on-board Marines, but Samuel turned quickly to his team, instantly getting their undivided attention. "Vic, Zeke," he said, "you're on."

"Yes!" Victoria said happily, "finally!"

Ezekiel nodded. "It's about time. I'm bored as Hell."

Agnes put a hand on Samuel's shoulder, which was difficult, given the height-difference. "I'll send Marines to assist them." He said.

"If you like," Sam answered calmly. "They'll be fine, though."

"Send 'em," Zeke scoffed. "They can clean up the alien entrails that I'm gonna spread all over your deck." He shrugged. "Better them than me."

And both Spartans left the room at a dead-sprint, never stopping to look back, get details on the aliens that were boarding or the weapons they'd have.

Nothing. They just grabbed their swords and charged.

"They'll be fine," Samuel said again, more to himself than anyone. He didn't need reassurance; it just felt good to say it. Two of his teammates were more than capable of dispatching dozens of Brutes—much less a pair of boarding crafts. He smiled, focusing on a link with the two soldiers. "Kill 'em all." He said.

A split-second later, two green lights flashed once in his HUD.

\* \* \*

><p>Victoria, now decked out in her upgraded MJOLNIR armor, was able to traverse the decks of the <em>Atonement</em> without fault. Her heads-up display gave her all the information she could ask for and, when it didn't, Gael was more than capable of filling in the blanks.

It felt good, she thought, to be back in her armor and out of what she considered to be her "civilian-clothes." There was just no replacement for the augmented speed and power that came with the MJOLNIR suit.

Running as fast as her legs would carry her, she sped through the corridors and the occasional maintenance shaft in an effort to get to the boarding craft before the Vice Admiral's soldiers. The Sangheili had just given her armor incredible new potential, and she wanted nothing in the world more than to put it to the test.

Suddenly, the blue-lit halls gave way to a series of tunnels drenched in ominous red light.

\_They've sealed off this sector,\_ she thought, slowing down. The cameras outside each door would scan her, take a few extra seconds, and then open the doors for her. As she stepped through, they instantly locked shut behind her.

"It's a good thing I won't be needing backup," she thought out-loud. "Something tells me they'd frown upon that."

"Something tells me you're right." Gael's voice echoed in her head. "You're almost there, by the way. Take this hall for another twelve meters, turn right, and then go through the second door on the right side of the hall. There should be about a dozen Brutes waiting for you on the other side."

Victoria nodded, running on and turning as she was instructed. "What kind of weaponry you think I'm dealing with?" She asked, "anything fun?"

The AI sighed. "Nothing too dangerous," she said. "That is, unless you're afraid of Brute Shots and Spike Grenades."

The Spartan gave out a short laugh. "Please," she said, "They couldn't hit me with a hundred of them. What makes you think a dozen is of any threat to me?"

At that, she reached the door the AI had spoken of. Not surprisingly, it was like all the doors nearby: glowing in a pale, red light.

"Here we go." Victoria said, and the door opened when the camera had finished scanning her. She ran inside, sword raised-

And saw nothing.

"Where-?"

A glowing red projectile flew slowly in her direction. Actually, to a normal soldier, it would've appeared to be coming fairly quickly, as the Firebomb had been thrown full-force by a Brute in the corner of the room. But, to the genetically-modified Spartan, it might as well have been floating in place.

She ducked low and got but a glimpse of the cloaked Brute that had thrown the dangerous explosive. It hit the wall behind her and detonated, sending highly-flammable, burning material all over the



floor nearby. Victoria smiled.

"My turn," she said, and activated her Active Camouflage. Instantly, her hands vanished in front of her, and she was rendered invisible to all but the most attentive eyes.

And Brutes were not known for their attentiveness.

The Spartan grinned wide, setting her visor to thermal-imaging. Instantly, nine hiding aliens were shown to her in bright red and orange. Even better was that they appeared to be looking around frantically, and she could hear them speaking to each other in grunts and growls. They couldn't find her, and it worried them.

\_And rightly so,\_ she thought, activating her Energy Sword. It made a quiet hissing noise as the blade emerged, but was still completely covered by her Active Camouflage.

Not wanting to wait for the new stealth technology to run out, Victoria ran forward, jumped over the first of the Brutes and landed in complete silence eight feet behind it. She ran at breakneck speed and skewered the Brute closest to the entrance of the boarding craft, which was still visible at the back of the room. Her camouflage failed as the alien's body crashed to the floor, and each of the Brutes turned to find out the cause of the disturbance.

Unfortunately, the disturbance was a Spartan gifted with an ungodly amount of agility and stealth. By the time the remaining eight Covenant soldiers had turned to face her, another of them had been stabbed through the neck and two more of them were trying to pry Plasma Grenades from their backs.

The Brutes gave up on camouflage now. The last of them, made up of three Stalkers, a single Minor and a Captain, fired everything they had at the indigo-armored Demon that was running circles around their small contingent. Victoria jumped, ducked, rolled, and sidestepped to avoid nearly a dozen Spike and Firebomb Grenades, all the while watching carefully for the Captain's dangerous Brute Shot.

With nothing in the room to use as cover, Victoria just kept running in circles, doing her best to dodge the aliens' assaults. Finally, they'd used the last of their grenades, and the Captain was deemed her primary concern. She kept going in her circle, running faster and faster as she activated the Energy Sword again.

And she vanished.

Her camouflage had recharged, and the Spartan was once again rendered invisible to the now-enraged Brutes. The Captain began to yell and roar at the others, motioning all around the room in a blind fury. Victoria grinned again.

\_It's like hunting,\_ she thought, \_except the animals aren't normally this dumb.\_ She pulled a Spike Grenade from her armor and ran up behind the Captain, priming it and impaling the Brute in the back of the neck with it. Her Active Camo failed again as she did so, but it didn't matter. The Captain's body was engulfed in a hail of superheated spikes, and another pair of Brutes had fallen to the ground by the time the aliens had realized what was going

on.

"Demon!" the Minor yelled, bringing a pair of Brute Maulers to bear. "Come here! Hold still!"

Victoria laughed loud enough for the Minor and the remaining Stalker to hear her. "Catch me if you can!" She yelled, and primed a Frag Grenade. She tossed it at the feet of the Minor and it exploded, destroying the alien soldier's Power-Armor and leaving it blinded for a few precious seconds in a cloud of smoke.

"Where are you?" The Brute roared, turning and spinning and then charging from the smoke. By the time it emerged, the Stalker was already dead, having been impaled by Victoria's Energy Sword.

And, to make matters worse, she was already cloaked once more.

"Your death is the will of the Prophets!" The Brute yelled. Victoria rolled her eyes. "You and your whole planet wi-

The Brute stopped short, gasping for breath as the blade mounted on the Spartan's right leg suddenly entered its back and exited through its stomach. Victoria drew back, pulling out the blade and stood still, arms crossed.

"What's that about me and my planet?" She asked, peaking over the Brute's shoulder as its legs threatened to give out beneath it. The alien turned its head to look at her, growling and spitting up small amounts of crimson blood.

"You will"

Victoria took out her Pistol, put it in the Brute's mouth, and pulled the trigger. The alien fell to the ground in a heap.

"Nice to meet you too," she said bitterly. At that, she did one last sweep of the room, checked the boarding craft for hostiles, and left the room.

\* \* \*

><p>"Those wretched humans have locked the door." A Brute Minor said, addressing the gold-armored Captain, Sirrus. The high-ranking Jiralhanae growled lowly.<p>

"Get it open!" He snarled. There were nine in his pack, just as there were nine on the other boarding craft that had attached to the humans' ship: six Stalkers, two Minors, and himself.

Immediately, one of the lowest-ranking soldiers stepped forward, activating the cloaking technology that the Prophets had just recently stated would be put into use en masse. Each and every Brute in the room, including Sirrus, had Active Camouflage installed.

And, remembering that, the Captain activated the technology, rendering himself invisible to all but his packmates. Instantly, the others followed suit.

Suddenly, the door at the end of the room slid open, and the Brutes froze in place. One of the Demons, clad entirely in black armor,

stepped calmly into the room. The soldier glanced around and seemed to stare right at Sirrus for a moment before turning and walking toward a small keypad mounted about ten feet from the door.

"Kill it," Sirrus said to the Brute Minor to his left. The low-ranking soldier happened to be closer to the Demon than he was, much to the Captain's dismay.

The Minor nodded, invisible, and then primed and threw a Spike Grenade at the human, leading the target only slightly. Calmly, easily, the Demon stopped, and the Spike Grenade lodged itself in the wall less than six inches in front of it. Two seconds later, it detonated, and dozens of dangerous spikes flew from the explosive in a deadly cyclone.

But the Demon was safely out of its way.

As soon as the grenade had gone off, the human walked forward again, stopping at the keypad and placing its hand on it. Sirrus wondered for a second what was going on, but stopped wondering when all the lights in the room suddenly died, rendering it completely pitch black.

Before the Captain's eyes could even adjust, he heard the roars and cries of agony from his fellow packmates being slaughtered in the horrible darkness. It took three full seconds for him to be able to make out anything, and what he saw made his blood run cold.

Four members of his contingent, all of them Stalkers, were lying dead on the floor or with their bodies draped against the walls. One of them was even stuck more than three feet from the floor against the wall, pinned there with its own unprimed Spike Grenades. The other three were killed in similar gruesome manners, all of them bleeding from what seemed like thousands of wounds or with their necks snapped and their heads hanging at gut-wrenching angles.

"Demon!" Sirrus snarled, looking in every direction for the human. It was still pitch-dark, however, and he could barely make out his own soldiers, who had long since deactivated their cloaking technology.

Suddenly, a glowing red object flew through the air and hit one of the remaining Stalkers, exploding and spilling its burning contents on the hapless Brute and casting wicked, twisted shadows around the room.

As the Brute flailed in agony, there was the flash of an Energy Sword behind Sirrus, and he turned just in time to catch a glimpse of the black Demon as it pulled its sword from the neck of one of his packmates.

"The Demon!" one of the Brute Minors roared, but it was too late: the fire from the grenade had all but stopped, and the light from the Energy Sword was gone. Sirrus couldn't find the human.

"Come together," Sirrus growled, and the three remaining Brutes formed a sort of triangle, all of them with their backs to the center. They were close, so close that one of them could not be assaulted without the others knowing.

Or, so they thought.

Sirrus was glancing around cautiously, looking for any sign of the Demon when he suddenly felt a weight pushing down on his left shoulder and heard his fellow Brute make a sort of gurgling, gagging noise. He turned and caught the Brute Minor as the Covenant soldier fell forward, its neck slit from ear to ear.

And, a second later, it collapsed and died, blood still leaking from its wound.

Now the Brutes were back-to-back, and, for once, Sirrus knew fear. They'd fought humans before, and most of the time didn't even seem to have a chance to lose. Now, however, they were facing something else, and they couldn't see it, much less kill it. The Demon moved in the shadows, unseen, and the Brute Captain thought about going to the keypad and restoring the lights. Perhaps that would-

There was a long, slow cracking noise, and the last remaining Brute other than Sirrus fell forward, away from the Captain, crashing to the floor. The gold-armored Jiralhanae spun around and looked down. He was about to turn over the body when he realized that there was no need: while the Brute was lying on its stomachâ€¦its face was still looking straight up at him.

"Noâ€¦" The Brute said, looking around frantically. He was alone. Normally, any Brute would lose all composure and sanity and attack the nearest humanâ€¦but this wasn't normal. There was no human to attack.

At least, not that Sirrus could see.

The Brute spun round and round, searching for the Demon, but was suddenly stopped by a sound right behind him. Acting out of instinct, Sirrus spun a half-circle and thrust out with the bayonet on his Brute Shot.

And hit nothing but the empty air.

At that exact moment, there was a loud hissing noise, and a glowing, white-hot blade of energy erupted in front of the Brute Captain. Behind it, between its two points, Sirrus could make out the pitch-dark visor of the Demon, reflecting his own terrified features.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hurry!" the leading officer, Lieutenant Dan Strickland said as he led the team of two-dozen Marines down the last corridor before reaching the room that one of the Spartans no-doubt had already charged into. He was the first to finally reach the door and it slid open-<p>

Revealing to the team a room drenched in darkness.

"What the Hell happened to the lights?" One of the Privates â€" John Wade â€" asked. Strickland had no idea. Immediately, he also noted something else: the unmistakable odor of burning flesh. In silence, he waged war with himself, fighting the urge to gag.

"Let's go." He said gravely, leading the team inside. They spread out, activating thermal equipment out of instinct, but the Lieutenant knew instantly that something was off. There were red and orange readings on the floor, but nowhere else.

Bodies.

There were nine of them, and all looked to be alien, although it was hard to be sure with the thermal imaging.

"Hit the lights." Strickland said, and one of the Marines walked to the keypad and punched in a few digits. A second later, the lights flickered to life.

"Holy shit," Wade said, stunned. Strickland agreed.

There were nine Brutes, all of their corpses strewn about the room. One was pinned to a wall, another incinerated and obviously the cause of that awful smell. Several more had their throats and numerous other parts slit. It was absolutely gruesome.

Suddenly, the Lieutenant caught something shimmering in the air in front of them, like a silhouette. He raised his Assault Rifle and was about to pull the trigger when that same shimmer rushed forward and jerked it from his hands, instantly materializing into a black-armored Spartan.

Strickland could hear something coming from the Spartan's helmet. It sounded like music, but he couldn't make out any words. Before he could focus on it, however, the soldier thrust the Assault Rifle back into his hands and pushed through.

"You've got clean-up duty." He snapped. As he left, the Lieutenant once again heard the music barely escaping the confines of the soldier's helm. "\_-and not really on what you've spent. Well it's obvious that you bore meâ€|\_"

The Covenant-style door slid slowly shut behind him as he left.

Wade was the first to speak. "What the Hell was that?" He asked, dumbfounded.

\* \* \*

><p>"Fiveâ€|fourâ€|threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|"<p>

Delilah activated the Pulse Generator for the second time, stopping a trio of Plasma Torpedoes in their tracks and detonating all three. Samuel breathed a sigh of relief.

"That was close." Agnes said, looking at the holograms as they came back online. "Aim for those Destroyers. Let's remind them who this system belongs to."

"Yes sir," the AI answered. "Energy Projectors ready." After a moment's pause, "Plasma Torpedo Launchers ready."

"Fire at will."

Two huge Plasma Torpedoes exploded from the tubes on the

\_Atonement\_'s sides, careening through space toward the ever-closing Covenant fleet. Seconds later, the Projectors opened fire again, hammering one of the Destroyers for more than ten seconds before its shields collapsed and it detonated in the middle of the Covenant formation.

"Ready the second MAC round." Agnes said. "Do it quickly."

Samuel was puzzled, but heard the AI answer, "yes sir" and knew that the Vice Admiral was up to something. In the meantime, however, there were other things to be tended to as well.

"Victoria," he said into the MJOLNIR link, "hello? Victoria?"

"Yeah Sam," she answered happily.

"How'd it go?"

"Nine Brutes," she said, disappointment riddling her tone. "They're lying in a heap in their boarding craft, ready to be shipped back to the Prophet."

"Good job," Samuel said. There was a green light in his HUD, and he cut the transmission. Next, he switched to Ezekiel. "Zeke? Hey, you hearing me?"

Nothing.

"Dang it, Zeke," the brown-armored Spartan said. "Answer me! Hey!"

Still no answer.

"You're killing me." Samuel said, sighing. He turned to Blaine. "Hey, Blaine, you want a job?"

The Spartan didn't answer.

"Blaine!"

Nothing.

"Hey!"

For a moment, Samuel wondered if he'd had a coronary or something in his armor and died, but, suddenly, changed his mind. He could see the Spartan's hand tapping his thigh ever-so-lightly—and with a beat.

SMACK!

The brown-armored leader hit Blaine lightly in the back of the head, instantly getting his attention. "What?"

"Turn your music down." Samuel said. "You want to do me a favor?"

"Well, not now I don't!" He rubbed the back of his helmet. "And I wouldn't be listening to it if I had an alien to kill."

Sam shook his head. "Too bad," he said with a tone of false consolation. "Go check on Zeke."

"Why?"

"Because he's not answering," Samuel explained.

"That's probably because his music is too loud." Blaine answered matter-of-factly. "You should smack him too."

Samuel nodded, smiling. "I willâ€|as soon as you bring him back."

"Fine," Blaine growled, and left the room. Samuel noticed that Agnes was looking right at them.

"Where's he going?" he asked.

"I sent him to find Zeke."

The Vice Admiral nodded, then turned his attention back to the holograms. "Is that MAC round ready yet?"

After five seconds, Delilah answered. "Yes it is," she said.

Agnes smiled. "How long until the torpedoes hit?" he asked.

"Thirty seconds," Delilah said. "Orders?"

Agnes seemed to ponder the idea for just a few seconds, and then said, "as soon as they impact with the Destroyer, the Covenant will begin to move their fleet to get around it. Focus on any of the Carriers or the CCS Battlecruisers. If any of them moves directly behind a Frigate or, better yet, a Frigate and a Destroyer, launch the MAC at it. The more ships we take in one shot, the better."

"Yes sir." The AI said.

"How many of those rounds do you have on here?" Landon asked, then quickly added, "sir."

"Four," Agnes answered. "That's all we had time to get magnetically charged."

"Impact in eight seconds," Delilah said, her voice echoing over the loudspeakers. Samuel waited patiently as she counted down again.

She hit zero, and he watched as the two torpedoes collided with the side of a Destroyer that had made a poor evasive attempt. Of all the weapons to try and dodge, the Plasma Torpedoes were not good choices. Because they were controlled with magnetic fields, they had an innate homing capability.

"There!" Agnes yelled, pointing at a CCS-Battlecruiser on the holographic panel that had just moved behind a Frigate and was trying to get in behind a damaged Destroyer.

"Firing," Delilah said monotonously. The bridge's lights went out again and the ship rocked as the MAC Gun fired. Before the power was ever restored, the round had penetrated the Frigate and kept moving.

It missed the Destroyer, but hit the CCS and essentially tore the ship in half with its overflowing kinetic energy.

"That's right!" Landon said, "take that you bastards!" He laughed, clenching his fists at his sides. "You came to the wrong damned solar system!"

"Radio the Axis and the Ulysses," Agnes said, "tell them to aim their MAC Guns at the Destroyer that we missed." He paused, then added, "and do it now, before the shields come back online."

"Yes sir," Delilah said. There were seven seconds of silence before she spoke again, answering, "firing in twenty."

"It'll be close." Agnes said, looking at the Destroyer on the holographic panel. "They'll be open for attack when they go to fire the MAC rounds. Let's give them some cover." The Vice Admiral gave a wicked smile. "Fire Archer Missile Pods "A" through "T," and spread them out a little."

"Sir," Delilah said, her voice stern but lacking any real emotion, "that's twenty-thousand Archer Missiles."

Agnes nodded. "Yes, Delilah," he said, annoyed, "I'm well aware of that. Now fire."

"Firing," the AI said.

\* \* \*

><p>Landon watched the holographic panel in awe as Archer Missiles flooded from the <em>Atonement</em> in unimaginable numbers. Instantly, the Covenant Seraphs were losing interest in their dogfights with UNSC Longswords, trying desperately to shoot down as many of the explosive projectiles as they could in the emptiness of space.

Still, twenty-thousand missiles will go a long way.

Suddenly, the hologram changed. One of the Covenant Destroyers abruptly detonated, clouds of fire billowing from twin holes on its sides and already spinning slightly in the middle of the alien formation. The two MAC Guns had been fired. That left both Frigates " hopefully " with five shots apiece.

"Sir," the AI's voice echoed throughout the bridge, "the Covenant Carriers are still deploying Seraph-class fighters. Our Longswords can't keep up with them. In addition, the Covenant are using Point-Defense Plasma Turrets and their Energy Projectors to intercept the Archer Missiles. An estimated nine-thousand missiles will impact with the front of the Covenant formation in forty-six seconds."

"Anything else?" Agnes asked.

"Yes," Delilah said. "Multiple Covenant starships are amassing large quantities of energy in their lateral and nose-mounted weapons. The Pulse will protect the Atonement, but the Axis and the Ulysses are still in the open."



Agnes mood immediately shifted from one of control and composure to one that more closely resembled Samuel's when Zulu Company was in jeopardy. "Can you extend the Pulse's range?" He asked.

"Negative," the AI answered. "It's been pre-tested, and only approved for the scenarios we've already checked. With your permission, activating the Pulse in twelve seconds," she finished.

"Do it." The Vice Admiral said lowly. "Activate the Pulse. First, warn the Frigates."

"Already done," Delilah said. "Activatingâ€¦"

Landon didn't even take notice when the bridge was plunged into darkness once more. What he did notice was a pair of brutal explosions that sounded over the speakers and erupted onto the monitors.

The power came back seconds later, and he could see that more than a dozen Energy Projectors had been fired. The Atonement had been spared all but the most minimal of damage.

But the Axis was not so lucky. Of the thirteen beams of energy that shot from the Covenant fleet, eight of them impacted the small UNSC Frigate. It was torn to shreds and torched by the superheated energy until nothing remained but the smallest pieces of wreckage.

The Ulysses had been hit as well, albeit only just barely. Five more beams had come from the fleet, but three were aimed at the Atonement. All of these were dissipated by the Pulse, and even one of the ones aimed at the Ulysses had been negated. Only one Projector managed to hit the Frigate, and it was a glancing blow to the starboard side.

"Status!" the Vice Admiral shouted.

"The Atonement's fine, sir!" a Marine working at one of the terminals answered. "The Axis is completely destroyed and the Ulysses is gonna be out of commission for a while."

"How many Energy Projectors were fired, Delilah?" Agnes asked.

"Thirteen, sir," the AI answered. Before she could continue, a female Marine interjected from a terminal at the far end of the room.

"Even their Carriers had a hand in the last bombardment!" She yelled. "They're not even supposed to be armed with Projectors."

"No," Delilah continued, annoyance radiating in her tone, "they aren't. Every Covenant starship in that fleet fired on us, and they all fired Energy Projectors, including the Destroyers and the Carriers."

"Alright," Agnes said, biting his lip with a fist clenched at one side. "I've had enough surprises for one day. I want those Carriers out of commission." He paused, taking a breath. "Arm the SHIVA Warheads and get the remote-controlled Longswords prepped and ready to go."

\* \* \*

><p>"Zeke, where the Hell are you?" Blaine asked into his MJOLNIR communication-link, trying to find the black-armored Spartan. His HUD said that his teammate was directly in front of himâ€|but didn't give him a distance. The Spartan could be anywhere on the ship, as long as he was in Blaine's line of sight.<p>

The white-armored soldier scowled. \_Since when is it my job to play babysitter for his sorry ass?\_ He rolled his eyes. \_Damn it, Zeke. I wish you'd just-\_

A footstep caught his attention. At least, it sounded like a footstep. Blaine glanced around, searching. He'd passed a pair of Marines only a moment before. Perhaps he was hearing one of th-

He heard it again, more definite this time. He glanced back and forth down the hallway, but saw nothing. A second later, his visor was changed to pick up heat signatures.

Still, he saw nothing.

Blaine reluctantly turned the visor back to its normal setting and proceeded slowly down the hall, listening intently for anything out of the ordinary. Of course, he made it only about eight steps before he thought he heard another footstep.

"Damn it!" He said, "this is getting real-"

Something cut through the air off to his left, and he felt a terrible pain as a Spike Grenade implanted itself into his arm. Barely, he was able to make out the shape of a cloaked Brute as it tossed the explosive from less than five feet away.

"Miserable son of a-" Using his free arm, Blaine ripped the Spike Grenade from his MJOLNIR suit and the skin that it had implanted itself in and pointed the head in the direction that he'd just seen the Brute. The alien roared as the grenade exploded, sending a conical blast of white-hot spikes screaming through the air. The spikes impaled the Brute in a dozen different places and sliced pieces of its alien hide into gruesome ribbons.

Instantly, his MJOLNIR armor inserted biofoam into the wound and Blaine switched his visor to the thermal setting once again. This time, he caught two cloaked aliens fleeing from him down the hall. They hit a four-way cross and each one went a different direction.

"Oh no!" Blaine growled. "You don't get to start this game and then just pull out! Oh, Hell no!" He sprinted to the cross-section and brought the Rocket Launcher up onto his shoulder. It took a half-a-second to aim, and then the 102mm projectile was flying down the hallway to his right, straight for the Covenant soldier.

Blaine put the launcher away and turned around just as the explosion sounded behind him. There was a roar, a groan of agony, and then nothing.

"Little bastard," he snapped as he charged down the opposite hallway, chasing after the other cloaked soldier. "Come back here!"

The alien didn't slow down. It ran down the hall, ignoring a pair of Marines as it charged by. One of them was smart enough to get the Hell out of the way when he saw Blaine coming. The other was not so intelligent, and found himself soaring through the air as the Spartan ran by.

The Brute rounded a corner and Blaine was only a few steps behind it. He got to the corner, turned it-

And smiled.

The Brute had turned accidentally into a small corridor with only a single exit: a door with a camera above it, glowing in blood-red light.

To Blaine's amusement, the alien deactivated its Active Camouflage and pulled out a pair of Brute Spikers, squaring off with him. Blaine pulled out his hammer, and the Brute began to step back. It kept backing up until it had backed itself all the way up against the door.

"You shouldn't have made me run." Blaine whispered cruelly. "Now you're gonna wish to your Hell-spawn Prophets you hadn't."

\* \* \*

><p>"Archer Missiles impacting in ten seconds," Delilah said. "The ships in the front of the formation are as good as scrap. In addition, three <em>Longswords</em> are loaded and ready to go."

Stephanie listened and watched intently as the holographic screen showed the Covenant formation shifting to take the brunt of the Archer Missiles. The remaining Frigates and a single Carrier moved to the front of the line, prepared to take the shots for the rest of the fleet.

After a few seconds, the first of the missiles impacted with the front of the formation, and over eight-thousand more crashed into the front-most ships. Both of the remaining Frigates and the Carrier that had moved up to act as a shield were completely destroyed, engulfed in countless tiny explosions that ripped through their shields and tore the starships to shreds.

"Sir!" the AI yelled, her voice frantic for the first time since Stephanie had heard her.

"What is it?" Agnes asked.

"We have Covenant reinforcements inbound."

"How many and what class?" Agnes said.

"We have three Frigates, a CCS Battlecruiser and another Battleship, sir." Delilah said. "They'll be exiting Slipspace behind the existing fleet in less than two minutes."

Suddenly, the door to the bridge opened behind the group. A trio of Spartans ran inside. "What'd we miss?" Victoria asked. Blaine and

Zeke were both with her.

"We've got Covenant reinforcements on the way." Samuel said. "I want Landon and Jason to he-" He paused, glancing back and forth across the bridge. At first, Stephanie couldn't figure out why. Then, she did.

"Landon?" she asked. "Jason? Where are you?"

"We're in the launch bay." Jason's voice echoed in her helmet.

"What the heck are you doing down there?" Samuel asked, clearly angry. "And why didn't you tell me you were leaving?"

"I knew you wouldn't let me." Landon's voice echoed. "Apparently, they're missing a \_Longsword\_ pilot since Blaine went and put a man in the Medical Wing with his incredible benching abilities."

"Oh no, you're not!" Samuel shouted.

"It'll be fine!" Landon said. "Come on!"

"Are you insane?" Samuel asked.

"Look," Jason said, "our troops' flying maneuvers are horrible. We watched them dogfight for fifteen minutes, and now Landon's gonna go protect the SHIVA Warheads and show them a thing or two."

Samuel rubbed the back of his helmet. "You've never even piloted a \_Longsword\_." He said.

"So?" Landon asked. "I could still do a better job than these ONI-idiot. Honestly, it's like watching blind people practice archery. They suck."

"We could use the extra pilots." Delilah's voice suddenly sounded in Stephanie's ears. She had wondered if the on-board AI could communicate with the Spartansâ€¦it appeared she had her answer. "We need those warheads to get through. If they do, we've got a clear shot at the rest of the fleet, reinforcements or not."

Samuel shook his head. "You get yourself killed," he growled, "and I am going to personally send Zeke to the afterlife to give you a piece of my mind."

"Hey!" The black-armored Spartan said. "That hardly seems fair."

"Please!" Landon laughed, "as if Zeke and I are going to the same place when it's all over."

Stephanie put her hand on the brown-armored giant's shoulder. "They need help." She said. "If Landon can do it, then why not let him?"

Samuel laughed slightly. "We'll talk about this later." He said. "Both of you, I expect you back on the bridge in five minutes."

\* \* \*

><p>"He said to be back on the bridge in five!" Jason said. "That was his polite way of telling you not to go!"<p>

Landon scoffed, grinning from ear to ear. "Please," he said, "I can do this and be back in five minutes." He boarded the Longsword in front of him and took his position at the pilot's seat. After a few seconds of scanning the controls, he began flipping switches, turning the fighter to full power.

"Good luck." Jason said in his helmet.

"Luck is for losers!" Landon yelled. "Now let's go!"

A second later, the Longsword shot from the launch bay.

\* \* \*

><p>"We just had an unauthorized launch." A female Marine said from behind Samuel. "It was a <em>Longsword<em>."

"What?" The brown-armored Spartan asked.

"The three remote-controlled fighters are about to launch, but that one just randomly took off through the open exit."

Samuel clenched his fists hard enough to crush diamond. "Dang it, Landon!" he said.

"Uh-oh," Blaine's voice echoed in the helmets of each Spartan. "Landon," he said, "you are officially in Hell when you get back."

"Noted," the other Spartan answered. "Just do me a favor," he said, "watch me on the hologram and tell me how I do."

Samuel turned his attention to the hologram, which Delilah carefully centered a small portion of to follow Landon's Longsword. In the other parts, however, he could see five Covenant starships emerging from Slipspace.

"Sir," the AI said, "Covenant reinforcements have arrived."

"I can see that." Agnes said.

"Sir, I've also got word from HIGHCOM. We have reinforcements on the way as well."

The Vice Admiral looked hopeful. "Consisting of?" he asked.

"First of all, we have three UNSC Frigates coming in from Slipspace." The AI said.

"Not bad," Zeke snapped, "but get to the part where you mention our reinforcements. If that's all we get, you might as well just send three red-and-white targets for the Covenant to shoot at. They'll last just as long."

"In addition," Delilah continued bitterly, "we have three UNSC Destroyers inbound as well. The UNSC Chimera and the Hydra will be the first two of these to appear, and that will be in

approximately one minute. The Daedalus will be close behind."

"Alright," Agnes said. "Let's hold them off. Ready the Energy Projectors and take aim at the remaining Destroyers and any Frigates foolish enough to get in the way. Ready all available Plasma Torpedo Launchers and aim at the incoming Battlecruiser. Fire at will."

"Firing all available plasma weapons in eighteen seconds," Delilah said calmly.

"And ready our third MAC round as soon as they fire," the Vice Admiral said. "We took one Battleship this way. I'd be more than happy to do it again."

"Sir," the AI said, "the MAC round will take time to prepare, and the Covenant are already amassing small amounts of energy. I'll have to be careful not to fire it while they have the ability to fire their own weaponry. Our window of opportunity to fire without being gutted by return fire will be almost nonexistent."

Agnes shook his head. "Okay," he said. "Let's rethink this then. Fire the plasma weapons. Ready the Pulse and the MAC round to the best of your ability. Reroute weapon and engine power to the two of them. As soon as the Covenant fleet fires, activate the Pulse, ready the MAC, and gut them."

"Yes sir."

Two seconds later, the Energy Projectors fired and decimated a pair of Covenant Destroyers, streaming burning energy for more than fifteen seconds each before the two alien crafts began to smoke and burn in the vacuum of space. In addition, two Plasma Torpedoes soared through the blackness, on a direct crash-course with the last remaining Destroyer.

"Send out the three remote-controlled Longswords." Agnes said. "As you do, fire an additional ten-thousand Archer Missiles. We need their fighters focused on anything but the bomb-carriers."

"Affirmed," Delilah said, and Samuel saw countless tiny specs on the holographic panel launch from the Atonement, along with three small crafts, unnoticeable among the thousands of other things cluttering the battlefield.

"Landon," Sam said, trying to find him on the panel, "how you doing?"

"I thought you were watching!" He yelled back, sounding hurt. "I'm leading a diamond formation of Longswords in the fourth quadrant on the holographic panel. Look for nine of us. When you find us, send the remote-controlled Longswords to follow us in."

"I'll talk to the Vice Admiral." Samuel said. He searched the holographic picture of the battlefield until he found the small series of specs arranged into a diamond formation. Of course, Landon would be taking point. He lived for such things.

"Did you find him?" Jason asked, coming up behind him abruptly.

"Yeah," Samuel said without looking at the other Spartan. He turned to Agnes. "One of my Spartans is leading a team of Longswords. He recommends that you send the remote-controlled fighters behind his squadron and he'll lead them to their targets."

The Vice Admiral nodded, pondering the idea. "Delilah," he said, "what do you think?"

"The Spartan is right." The AI said. "\*\*\*Spartan 003\*\* has eliminated fourteen Seraph fighters already and has improved the battle-effectiveness of those he has been leading by more than forty-percent."

"Alright," Agnes said. "Do it."

Samuel saw the trio of computer-controlled Longswords soar away from the Atonement and start to close the distance on Landon's party of fighters. He silently prayed that none of the Seraphs would get smart and decide to fire on them or his teammate.

"Plasma Torpedoes impacting in five seconds," Delilah said. Sure enough, Samuel counted down and watched as the two shining strips of plasma hit the remaining Destroyer and tore through its shields and into its hull.

And at that very second, a trio of UNSC Frigates appeared through two separate rifts near the Atonement. Without a second's pause, they immediately fired their MAC Guns on the injured Destroyer, reducing it to scrap in seconds.

"This is the UNSC Contender," a male's voice echoed around the bridge.

Three seconds later, another voice, "this is the UNSC Prometheus. Let's go to work!"

And then, finally, "this is the UNSC Dauntless reporting in. Sorry we're late, Vice Admiral."

"Not a problem," Agnes said. "Thanks for the assistance."

"Hell, sir," the man from the Contender said, "we're just gettin' warmed up."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: dramatic music Well, I hope everyone liked it. Next time, I conclude the space-battle, and Zulu Company will be sent on their most dangerous mission yet (well, maybe...they were made to plant bombs in a bomb-making facility...lol). Still, I'll have it up soon! Thanks again, and please review and vote for your favorite Spartan!! Thanks again to everyone!<strong>

\*\*BTW, props to anyone (other than people I know personally) who can tell me what song Zeke was listening to. lol\*\*

### 43. Chapter 42: Atonement Of Reach

**\*\*Author's Notes:** Yes...I know, it's been FOREVER. Trust me, it's been so for me as well. Unfortunately, with school letting out...instead of getting MORE time, like I originally thought I would, I was bombarded by more random things than I could imagine. Between job-hunting (due to one falling through), college orientation, 18th birthday, vacation, etc...well, it's been a really, really busy month. However, this chapter is done, so I'm going to my very best to get back on track. Also, all of you who sent me e-mails: I responded to a few of you, but, the rest, for one reason or another, the FanFiction PM thing stopped working on me about a week-and-a-half ago, so...yeah. I apologize. I am not dead (contrary to popular belief)...I've just been on an unfortunate, unplanned hiatus. Writer's Block COMBINED with a major time-lack will do that to you.\*\*

**\*\*But,** now that I can finally respond to all of you, I will do that first!\*\*

**\*\*REVIEWS:\*\***

**\*\*Samson00:** Hola! Hey, I'm glad you liked the lead-up and the beginning of the fight...since you helped so much with the tech, lol. Still, you'll have to tell me what you think of what's ahead too. I'm hoping that (after this chapter...unfortunately) it will get much better.\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** lol, glad you enjoyed the last couple. You'll find that the music will continue throughout, on rare occasion.\*\*

**\*\*Samus 117:** You can assume what you want about Vic and what happened in her last trip to ONI. For now, I won't be revealing much. Sorry. Later, though, you can count on something coming up. Thanks for reviewing! Oh, and Metroid is AWESOME.\*\*

**\*\*Mhop12:** I apologize. I wrote. Writer's Block attacked. I deleted. I wrote again. I deleted again. You get the idea...\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Hey, thanks for your review on the last one! I'm glad you liked the interactions between Spartans (and Zeke and everything else, lol). And yes, Magnus, as promised, will hopefully be back in the next three to four chapters. (I don't know if I gave a number before...it's been too long...sigh). Oh, I'm glad you like the ship so far. It means I did a semi-decent job...lol. Still, the genius part of that goes to Samson, no doubt. Also, good call on the music. There will be more of those as we go along, lol. ;) \*\*

**\*\*Lord Zander:** Let's see...first: Yes, in H2, you did see some Hunters and Grunts helping the Arbiter. However, for SOME reason, in H3, you get none. Nothing. Squat. They all shoot at you. Secondly, the scene with Zeke...it was mostly my own doing. I'm sure there are movies out there with "stealth" kills in the dark meant to inspire fear, but I can't think of any one that might have used for reference or inspiration. Oh, and, the poll will be up...pretty much 'til I finish this story. I'll put a new one up when I start the second one. Finally, I'm glad that, this time, you could get into it, and I hope the hiatus didn't scare anyone off. I am still writing, and will continue to.\*\*



**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** This whole space-segment is giving me Writer's Block! lol. But no, I appreciate the compliments on the last two chapters, and I hope that this one isn't a terribly disappointing follow-up. It's not perfect, but I'm hoping to work back up into my "rhythm," so to speak. Also, the comment on the Navy and Marines...duly noted. :) Thank you. My bad, lol.\*\*

**\*\*armoured-blade:** Hey! Glad you loved the space-fights and the Atonement so much! And Zeke too...but, in answer to your questions/comments: first of all, you will see some battle from the Longsword this time around...but I warn you: it was really, really hard for me to do. There's nothing ANYWHERE in the books that gives any indication of what a space-battle from a Longsword would be like, or their controls, etc. It was new, but I did try, and I hope it lives up to expectations. Finally, in regards to Vic: well, you'll just have to wait and see what happens with her. lol. Sorry, I'm secretive about my master-plots. Thanks so much for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*Rimshooter:** Hey, thanks for your compliments! Also, I told you I'd be back (yes, I know, I said Friday/Saturday, and it's TECHNICALLY Sunday at 12:40 in the morning, but I'm doing the best I can, lol).\*\*

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian:** College! I understand! I'm losing my mind over here! lol. Anyways, thanks for your review and your compliments. The part about archery I had hoped would get a kick from some people, lol. Oh, and in answer to your question: they are on a human vessel (a Marathon-class Cruiser) that has many pieces of Covenant architecture and machinery on it. Thanks!\*\*

**\*\*hellhound cerberus:** lol, thanks very much for the compliments. Actually, if I did think of sending this in...well, some chapters would not make the cut, for certain. In fact, I can't say that most of them would. Maybe I'm my own toughest critic (actually...I'm not, I have a friend who is much better at it, lol), but I don't think a lot of it is up to par with their own authors. But, regardless, thank you. It does make my day to hear such things. :)\*\*

**\*\*Lecter42:** Hey, thanks for taking the time to review for me! First off, let me answer your statement about the enormous quantity of Archer Missiles by saying this: Yes, it probably is a little over-the-top (maybe a LOT over-the-top), but I could find NOTHING from Bungie about reload times or even the number of missiles fired on average in a minute or anything like that. I wanted a giant amount to ensure destruction and to give a nice opening to the destructive force of humanity's new weapon. There could be a flaw in it. I do appreciate the careful eye to bring such a thing to my attention though, so thank you. Honestly, I take it to mean that you're really reading and not just skimming, like some people (lol...guilty as charged in some cases). But, anyway, you will see more from Stephanie and the others here shortly (Landon in this chapter). And, in answer to your question about the dropship: it will also be addressed in this chapter. Good eye, once again. :) Thanks!\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Good call on the music, my friend! And thank you very much for the compliments! I hope you like what's to come!\*\*

**\*\*vernox:** lol, you're sorry you don't review...I'm sorry I don't

UPDATE. But, seriously, I hope you enjoyed the five or six chapters you had left to read. I promise I will do the very best I can to get some more out for you here pretty quick. No guarantees, but I swear I'll try.\*\*

\*\*Bashbro: lol, sorry! You have to pick one...I know, it's not fair. I didn't like it that I couldn't vote more than once...and it's my poll! (lol, jk). Still, thanks for reviewing, and for your compliment!\*\*

\*\*Gaming Girl: Hello! Glad to see someone new picking up my story! I'm really glad that you like it so much, but, I have to tell you: one, I am not the LEAST BIT ORGANIZED, lol. Seriously...I'm a disaster. ;) Also, I'm sorry to tell you that I cannot draw...well, anything. If I tried to draw my Spartans...they'd probably look like multi-colored stick-figures. Seriously, I'm that bad. If I could FIND someone who could draw them for me, I would be THRILLED. Still, I'm glad you like it and, I think, if there's no picture to go on, it leaves more to the imagination, which is good in the long run. Thanks again!\*\*

\*\*j3ssj3r0ck3r0n: Hey, I'm glad you liked the start to the space-fight. Really though, I just hope you like what's to come the same amount, lol.\*\*

\*\*Alright, so now I apologize for rushing the reviews a bit...but I really want this up there, and I have a lot left to do yet before I go to bed. Once more, I am sorry it took so long. I'm really doing the best I can. Thank you all for sticking with me, and I hope you enjoy what's ahead for Zulu Company!\*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 42:<strong>

â€" \*\*Atonement of Reach â€"\*\*

\*\*1800 Hours - February 1, 2553\*\*

\*\*Aboard the UNSC \_Atonement Of Reach\_ - In Orbit\*\*

"Alright," Agnes said calmly, eyeing the holograms. "Give me the best, quickest rundown you can, Delilah. What have we got left on the field?"

The AI took a few seconds to process the request. Finally, she answered, "the Covenant force now consists of three Frigates, three \_CCS\_ Battlecruisers, two Carriers, the Battleship, and the Assault Carrier. Our defending formation, with the Destroyers on the way, will be three operating Frigates, the \_Contender\_, the \_Prometheus\_, and the \_Dauntless\_; three Destroyers, the \_Chimera\_, Hydra, and \_Daedalus\_; the \_Ares\_, and the \_Atonement.\_"

Blaine sighed quietly. The odds were not in their favor.

"How long until the Destroyers arrive?" the Vice Admiral asked.

Delilah took two seconds before answering, "one minute and counting."

"Don't forget about us!" Landon's voice echoed around the bridge through mounted speakers as the image of his formation approached the Covenant on the holographic panel. "We've got quite a load here, and the sooner these Covie bastards get a taste, the happier I'll be!"

"Vice Admiral," Delilah said before anyone could respond, "the Destroyers are requesting orders as well. I have a possible plan of attack," she added smugly, "if you're interested."

"Hit me," Agnes said.

"Two of our Destroyers will be exiting Slipspace on the port side of the Atonement while the other will come out on our starboard side. Their positions will give them a prime line of fire on all three of the Covenant Frigates. Each one should have the firepower in their MAC Guns to take one out without a large strain on their power-supply."

Blaine nodded, grinning slightly. "Not bad," he said quietly into his helmet, "but you'd do better to our Frigates charge the MAC Guns as well and attack the lone CCS out in front." He stared at the holographic panel, watching the alien formation.

Sure, the three Covenant Frigates were out in the front, but they were staggered, and there was a hole in between them that gave a good line of fire against one of the Battlecruisers, whose commanding officer had been foolish enough to order it to the front of the line. It was almost too good to pass up.

"We'll take it, Delilah." Agnes said. "Order the Destroyers to power their MAC Guns and have them ready when they exit Slipspace. Also," he paused, "tell the Contender, the Prometheus, and the Dauntless to ready their MAC Guns for another round."

"Sir?" Delilah said questioningly.

"Tell them, when the Destroyers enter normal space, to fire on the CCS Battlecruiser in the center of the formation. The three of them together should be enough to dispose of the shields."

Blaine cocked his head. Hmm I guess this guy's a little better than we gave him credit for. He thought proudly. Still, his leadership is kinda shaky. The Spartan shook his head.

"Yes sir," the AI answered.

"And Landon," Agnes continued, looking at the holographic panel.

"Yes sir?"

"Take your formation around the Covenant's ships. Their Carriers are stationed almost on top of their Frigates, they're so close. Now we're gonna make 'em pay for that. We'll use the explosions from the Frigates to damage the shielding on the Carriers. You're to send one SHIVA to each Carrier, and take the third one to the CCS in the

middle of the formation. Do you understand?"

"Loud and clear," Landon answered, excitement filling his voice. "We won't let you down."

"I know you won't." Agnes said. "Now let's put an end to this, once and for all."

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm telling you," Ezekiel growled, "I don't leave aliens alive. They couldn't have come from the group I handled."<p>

Samuel shook his head. "I'm not saying you did it on purpose." He said. "Trust me; I know that's not your thing. I'm asking if you double-checked the boarding craft."

"Yes," the black-armored Spartan snapped, "I triple-checked the damn thing. There were no Brutes on-board."

"Did you check the equipment-rooms?" Victoria's voice suddenly sounded in Samuel's ears. "I mean, did you check them all?"

"Yeah," Zeke said, "I did. I checked all four of them."

"Four?" the female Spartan asked. "You checked four?"

Ezekiel was quiet for a second. "Yes." He said carefully. "How many did you check?"

"I checked five."

"Son of a--"

"That's enough!" Sam interrupted. "Victoria, how many were in that room on your ship?"

"Three," she answered instantly.

Samuel nodded. "We'll need to watch for more. But, thankfully, Blaine killed three, and there haven't been any sightings since, so we should be okay."

"Sam," Zeke interjected, holding his hands up defensively, "I swear there were only four rooms. I don't miss much, and I sure as Hell don't miss something as obvious as a big, glowing, Covenant door."

"It probably wasn't obvious," Victoria said. "Two of the doors that I found weren't even Covenant-style. They were smaller, and one of them was behind a weapons-locker."

"She's right," Samuel said. "Be more careful next time, and we'll call it a day."

"Got it," Zeke said, conceding.

"In the meantime," the brown-armored leader said, "we need to wait for Landon to get back. Once he does, we're off this ship in a hurry."

"Yes sir," Victoria answered.

"Understood, Goliath," Zeke responded.

"Destroyers inbound!" Delilah said, her voice echoing all over the bridge. "Here we go!"

"Yeah," Samuel said to himself, "here we go."

\* \* \*

><p>"Alright everybody," Landon shouted into the intercom mounted in front of him inside the <em>Longsword</em>, "You heard the Vice Admiral. It's time to show the Covenant our delivery policy: three fifty-megaton loads, or your money back. We're hitting the two Carriers and the \_CCS\_ in the middle." He paused. "Those are the two really big ones with itty-bitty ships around them and the big one with lots of guns toward the front, for those of you who are unfamiliar."

There were a few grunts and mumbles from the rest of the formation but, after a few seconds, the only answers were "yes sir" and "got it." Landon smiled.

"Good." He said. The Spartan was about to give additional orders when a static began crackling over his intercom.

"Landonâ€"â€"got Seraâ€"â€"mingâ€"â€" "

He could tell that it was Samuel's voice, but only just barely. "Say again, Sam," he said. "Seraphs?" Instantly, Landon was checking his radar, but it wasn't showing much.

"â€"â€"fighters incâ€"â€"ing. Dâ€"â€"copy?"

"Yeah, Goliath," Landon said. "I copy. Seraphs incoming. Where from?"

"Everâ€"â€"ere."

Landon felt a pang of fear as he scanned the radar for any sign of movement. At first, it wasn't picking up anything. But, a second later, he understood what the other Spartan had been saying.

All at once, the \_Longsword's\_ radar began showing red blips at the borders of its range. Seconds later, the blips had moved inside and dozens more had taken their places. Suddenly, Landon was staring at more than fifty Seraph-class fighters, all within his radar's effective range.

"Evasive maneuvers!" He shouted over the intercom. "Dodge what you can, but protect the warheads!"

Seconds later, the formation was torn apart by dozens of streaming plasma bolts, all screaming by and immediately detonating anything they came into contact with. Landon swerved and piloted the craft in a manner similar to how a maniac would have: dodging every which way and steering in totally random directions at times, without so much as a clue what was in front of him until he was already

there.

Slowly but surely, the Seraphs began landing steady hits on the squadron, taking out three of the Longswords before the pilots could even see them to fight back. Landon activated the intercom.

"Question!" he yelled, waiting for someone on the bridge to respond.

After a moment, Delilah's voice answered. "What is it, Landon?"

"I've been using the rotary guns up 'til now, but that was against single ships. What's this bird got in the way of actual firepower?"

"The Longswords that came from the Atonement are altered versions." Delilah said. "You've got a set of six ASGM-10 missiles and thirty Moray Space Mines. Do you know how to use the Moray System?"

"Of course I do!" Landon shouted. "Moray Mines can be detonated remotely or by proximity, and they have a dangerous payload. How many did you say I had?"

"Thirty," the AI repeated.

At that second, twin bolts of plasma shot by the Longsword's right wing. Landon glanced out the window to see a Seraph flying dead-even with him.

"Alright," he growled, "now you're gonna get your ass kicked!" He turned the Longsword hard to the right, forcing the Seraph to move to avoid a collision. "That's right," the Spartan snapped, "you better move!" He searched until he found the ASGM firing mechanism and got the Seraph in his sights.

"Just lock on and fire," Delilah's voice suddenly echoed in his helmet, "the missile will do the rest."

"I'm not five! What the Hell do you think I'm doing?" Landon snapped. "You just keep watch over the rest of the fleet and let me do my job."

"As you wish," the AI said, and terminated the connection.

Landon got the Seraph once more in his sights, readied, and fired.

The ASGM-10 flew from the Longsword and streaked toward the Seraph at more than twice the speed of either craft. Landon barely had time to watch before it hit the back of the Covenant fighter, right between the two spiked protrusions on its rear. The Seraph detonated, lighting up the dark space around it, and Landon flew the Longsword through the flames and metal.

"That's what I thought!" He shouted, glancing back as he continued on. "You freaks can kiss my-"

"Landon!" A voice shouted in his head. It was Samuel.

"What?"

"Stop yelling and start shooting. You've got about a dozen more of those before you're clear to deliver the warheads, and the Destroyers are already exiting Slipspace!"

There was a pause, and then Blaine finished, "that means get your ass in gear!"

Landon sighed, checking his radar. "Ten-four," he said. "I'll take care of what's left." He grinned. "Don't blink though; you might miss it."

With that, he terminated the connection and prepped the Moray System on the Longsword. The AI had told him that he had thirty of the mines to work with.

That's more than enough for a dozen ugly aliens, he thought, releasing eight of the explosives in space behind them and setting them to detonate by remote.

Landon turned the Longsword to the right and kept going until he could see a few of the Seraphs, most of which were firing on his squadron. He focused on one and opened fire with the rotary guns.

The response was immediate. The Covenant fighter turned from its target and started making a beeline for Landon, dodging left and right to avoid the fire from his machineguns. The Spartan grinned, turning hard and still firing, hitting three more of the alien ships before making a full retreat in the opposite direction.

"Come on, you ugly bastards!" He shouted. "Come and get me!" He piloted the Longsword straight ahead, dodging only when absolutely necessary to avoid the four ships' plasma cannons.

Soon, however, the Covenant crafts had proven faster than the UNSC Longsword and had easily caught up with him. A few of them even flew straight passed him and kept going, looping around far beyond for another go.

And up ahead, Landon could see his makeshift minefield.

He grinned and gunned it, soaring straight for the two ships in front of him. They opened fire and plasma screamed by his left and right sides as the pair of Seraphs grew larger and larger in his view. As if that weren't enough, the other two fighters behind him were gaining ground.

"Four seconds," the Spartan whispered. "Three seconds."

Finally, as the Seraphs closed in on him and the eight high-yield mines dominated the space directly in front of him, Landon killed all forward-propulsion and the fighter almost immediately slowed to a gentle drift. At once, the two Seraphs behind him sped by and the two in front kept coming.

"And now," Landon said, fingering the detonator, "you're dead." He

grinned wickedly.

\* \* \*

><p>Eight burning explosions erupted in the open space, swallowing the four nearby Covenant Seraphs and obliterating the unfortunate crafts. At the same time, the Destroyers had finally completely emerged from Slipspace and opened fire on the front of the Covenant formation.<p>

Suddenly, the enormous battlefield that had been previously dominated by small dogfights of the Seraphs and \_Longswords\_ was lit up with a dozen explosions from the Covenant's end. With nearly every major ship in the UNSC arsenal firing, the front of the line was a dangerous place to be.

The Frigates went first. Twin shots from each of the arriving Destroyers were enough to blast their shields " and then their hulls " straight to Hell. The three alien ships exploded in clouds of red flame, their own destruction violent enough to hit the Carriers taking cover immediately behind them.

Even as the Covenant ships began to turn " to scramble " trying to get some form of cover from the incoming fire, the UNSC Frigates rained Hell on the \_CCS\_-Battlecruiser in the center, which was still facing the formation and now amassing energy at its sides.

"The shields on the \_CCS\_ and a single Carrier are down, Vice Admiral." Delilah said. "However, the one farthest right wasn't as close to its respective Frigate, and its shields have survived the detonation, if only just barely."

"Damn it," Agnes said. "Send two of the warheads in. Take out the other two while we've got the chance. As for the third, well, we'll just have to-"

"I've got you covered, sir!" Landon's voice sounded through the speakers. Jason grinned widely.

"Son, I'm not sure you realize the strength of those shields on a-"

"Trust me." Landon said sternly. "I will handle the Carrier." For once, there wasn't an ounce of emotion in his voice.

"Alright," Agnes said. "You've got the Carrier." He turned to the holographic panel. "Delilah," he said, "how close are the other two warheads?"

"They'll be ready in less than three minutes, sir," the AI said. "And I think you'd better watch this."

Every head in the room turned as a giant monitor flickered to life. On it, Jason could see a single \_Longsword\_ rushing toward the side of a Covenant ship at breakneck speed.

"What's he-?"

"Landon!" Samuel suddenly yelled. "If you pull something out of Independence Day, so help me-"



"Are you out of your damn mind?" Landon shouted back. "I'm a lot of things, but suicidal has never been one of them."

At this, Samuel calmed down slightly, though he still looked more than a little nervous.

On the screen, Jason watched as five missiles streaked forward from the Longsword and, in a matter of seconds, impacted with the shield surrounding the ship. Five blossoms of fire erupted, rippling the barrier and showing its dull-red color for a moment before-

It held. The shield, somehow, withstood the blasts, and everyone could hear Landon cursing like a sailor over the intercom.

"Forget it, Spartan." Agnes said reluctantly. "Report back to the Atonement."

"With all due respect, sir," Landon said, "I said I'd get the Carrier, and I'm gonna get the damn Carrier." He paused. "So, if you wouldn't mind retracting that order so that I don't have to be court-marshaled laterâ€¦" He trailed off, then finished, "please?"

Agnes sighed. "Alright," he said. "But I side with **Spartan 025**: if you pull something out of the movies, you'd better hope it kills you."

"Yes sir." Landon's voice echoed happily. On the screen, the Longsword was closing in the Carrier rapidly, and showed no signs of slowing down. Jason's eyes narrowed as Landon pushed forward, even as Seraphs in the area appeared to be getting suspicious, turning toward the craft, but not yet mounting any sort of attack.

"Landon!" Samuel snapped as the Longsword rocketed toward the barrier surrounding the Covenant craft. He got no response and, when Landon's fighter was less than four seconds from impact, started shouting, "Landon! Landon, what are you-?"

At the last possible moment, Landon jerked the controls to the Longsword and the craft flew straight up in relation to the Carrier, skimming the shield as he went.

"Come on, Landon!" Stephanie shouted. "What the Hell are you doing?"

At that moment, the spot where the Spartan had decided to veer upwards detonated nearly two-dozen times, and Jason saw the shield begin to short out, again and again, until it finally collapsed under the heavy rain of destruction.

Landon's laugh was loud and confident over the speakers. "Moray Mines: alien bastards. Alien bastards: Moray Space Mines!" He said in between chuckles, apparently trying to "introduce" them. "Mess with the best, die like the rest!"

Jason saw Agnes smile wide. "Not bad," he said with a nod. Then he turned to the AI. "Get that last SHIVA inside and wait for their shields to return. When they do, send 'em straight to Hell."

"Yes sir." Delilah answered.

"Not too shabby, Landon," Samuel said with an air of comfort. And then, his tone changed. "Now get back in here! That's an order!"

Landon's laughs died down instantly. "Ah," he sighed, "alright; ten-four, Goliath. I'm on my way."

\* \* \*

><p>"Holy shit," Blaine said as every monitor on the bridge lit up as a thousand tiny explosions " and three really big ones " illuminated the space in front of them. Three of the alien crafts, the Frigates, had been destroyed outright and were still giving off billows of flame. But the real fireworks were coming from the bigger ships.<p>

The Carriers and the \_CCS\_ had restored their shields a moment before, and they'd probably felt pretty good about so narrowly surviving such an assault.

Two seconds later, the SHIVA warheads went off.

As if a fifty-megaton explosion wasn't enough, the Covenant-style energy shields surrounding the ships kept the blasts from spreading, in turn increasing the damage exponentially and, in the end, blowing all three ships into the next millennia.

"I like it, Landon." Blaine said with a smile over the private channel. "It's like the 4th of July"only bigger."

"Damn right!" The other Spartan answered. "When I do holidays, I do 'em right!"

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel was staring blankly at the holographic panel. It showed heavy Covenant casualties at the moment, including everything but four of their remaining ships. The Carriers were destroyed. The Frigates guarding the front of the fleet had been obliterated. Hell, even the <em>CCS</em>-Battlecruiser had been neutralized.

And Landon, somehow, was on his way back to the ship. His entire squadron, save for him and one other ship, had been eliminated, but they'd somehow totaled over fifty Seraph-class fighters, and Landon had even managed to score some points with the Vice Admiral before coming back to base.

\_All in a day's work,\_ he mused, smirking slightly.

"Get the MAC Gun ready!" Agnes shouted. "We need to hit them while they're still recovering! Tell the Destroyers and the Frigates to ready whatever they've got left!"

"Sir," Delilah answered almost immediately, "the Covenant Battleship is amassing enormous quantities of energy at its mounted weapons. We need to move."

"Move?" the Vice Admiral asked, sounding stunned. "This is a

\_Marathon\_-class Cruiser. We can't just 'move' right out of the way of a dozen cannons."

"I believe that the Battleship has taken aim at the smaller ships, sir." The AI said. "If we move, I can line up a shot on both it and one of the remaining \_CCS\_-Battlecruisers."

Agnes seemed to consider this for a minute before answering. "We can't sacrifice these ships for one shot." He said. "Ready the Pulse."

"Sir," the AI said, "while I understand your orders, I must argue. We can take out the Covenant's largest weapon here if we move. And, if we don't move, its weapons will hit us all. Our best bet is to spread out our forces and hope for the best."

Suddenly, the intercom began to crackle. A second later, the man from the \_Contender\_ spoke. "She's right, Vice Admiral." He said. "We've gotta do whatever the Hell we can to take these bastards out. Each and every one of the soldiers here with us has chosen humanity's fate over their own." He paused. "Sir, we can do this!"

Agnes sighed. "I'm not in the habit from changing orders," he said.

Ezekiel scoffed.

"But," he continued, "in this case, it seems there is no choice. Delilah, ready the ship and give me coordinates. After that, you're free to move us to where you can get the best shot. In addition, reroute all unnecessary power to the MAC."

"Yes sir," the AI said proudly, "rerouting all power now."

"Zeke," Samuel's voice suddenly echoed in the Spartan's head.

"Yeah, Goliath?" he answered.

"I've already told the others. Landon's due back in less than three minutes. Once he gets here, we're gone. Clear?"

Ezekiel nodded. "Yeah," he said, looking down at the Energy Sword strapped to his waist, "crystal."

"We're moving!" Delilah said. "Coordinates are being uploaded to the monitor in front of you. Also, our position is being highlighted on the holographic panel."

Sure enough, a moment later, Ezekiel could see a large yellow glow on the panel far in front of the Covenant fleet, but on the right hand side.

The black-armored Spartan felt a smile crawl across his face. Things were about to get ugly for one side. He didn't know which one, but something was about to hit the fan, no doubt about it.

"Landon's back!" Jason said suddenly, pointing to Jason's respective spec on the holographic panel. It had just melted into the \_Atonement's\_ much larger image.

Samuel nodded at the front of the group. "Vice Admiral," he said, and the man turned to see him. "It's time for us to do our job."

Agnes nodded. "See to it that you do." He said. "The ship you're after is in Docking Bay A6. It's a Prowler."

"Got it," Samuel said. Then he turned to the others. "Come on," he said, "we've got a job to do."

Blaine was first. "Hell yeah."

Jason followed, pumping his Shotgun as loudly as he could and giving out a cold laugh.

None of the others spoke. Not even Ezekiel. Victoria and Stephanie were calm, cool, and silent sometimes, but it was uncharacteristic for the black-clad Spartan.

But so was leaving aliens alive.

\_Not again,\_ he thought bitterly, clenching his fists even as the others turned to leave. \_Playtime is over. I won't miss another one. I swear it.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Landon, upon exiting the <em>Longsword<em>, was immediately given instructions to proceed to the docking bay and meet with the others. He checked his HUD and, thankfully, it was about a two-minute walk from the one he'd returned to.

He walked to the door, took a deep breath as it opened, and then immediately took off on a dead-sprint for the other docking bay. He got only a few steps, however, before something shook the entire ship, and the lights dimmed, and then died. Slowly, his visor adjustedâ€|and finished just in time for the ship's tunnels to light back up, temporarily blinding him.

"Damn it!" He cursed, shaking his head. Even as he did so, he couldn't help but wonder what had caused the earthquake on-board a ship that was in space. The lights had been taken out, no doubt, by the MAC firingâ€|

But that still left a lot to the imagination.

"Sam," he said into his helmet, "any idea what that was?"

It took several seconds for the other Spartan to answer. "No idea," he said. "Just get to the ship. The sooner we get to the Assault Carrier, the happier I'll be."

"Amen to that," Landon muttered. He took two more good steps before a red light suddenly began to flash on and off, lighting up the tunnel he was in.

"Attention!" Delilah's voice echoed all around him. "Attention! The \_Daedalus\_ has been hit! All remaining ships: target the remaining \_CCS\_ with full force!"

It took Landon a moment to realize that, while the message was being

broadcast through the Atonement, its true purpose was to alert the other ships as well. Though, why the AI couldn't be bothered to only speak through the intercoms on the other ships, he had no idea.

"Did she say the 'remaining' CCS?" Stephanie asked over the Spartans' open channel.

"Yeah," Jason said. "I'd say that means Delilah got her shot."

"Can we just get the Hell out of here?" Stephanie asked. "I'm tired of sitting around in this tin-can."

"Yeah," Blaine said, his voice riddled with false enthusiasm, "now we get to go to a different tin-can. I can't wait."

"Hey!" Landon said, finally deciding to jump in, "I'd much rather be in a Longsword right now, butâ€¦well, clearly, I'm not!" He continued walking, slowly getting closer to the docking bay.

"You might not get so lucky next time." Zeke said.

Landon shook his head. "No luck about it," he said. "Piloting, drivingâ€¦that's what I do. You snipe. I drive. You slice. I pilot."

"You disobey direct orders--"

"So there is one thing we have in common." Landon retorted.

"Alright," Samuel said, "alright. All children are to leave the sandbox and proceed directly to the docking bay."

"Got it."

"Sure."

"Good." He said. "Landon, how close are you?"

The Spartan smiled. "Just opening the door," he said.

\* \* \*

><p>"We've neutralized all but the last <em>CCS</em>-Battlecruiser and the Assault Carrier." Delilah said, her electronic voice echoing throughout the bridge with more than a little bit of pride. "In addition, Zulu Company is on the Prowler and will be launching in eighty seconds."

"What about the Destroyer?" Agnes asked, staring wide-eyed at the monitors that showed the surrounding UNSC fleet. "Can we hope for any survivors?"

Delilah was silent for several seconds. "The Daedalus isâ€¦completely destroyed, sir. The odds of anyone surviving areâ€¦remote."

"We could have used the Pulse." Agnes said. "There was a ch--"

"Sir!" the AI interrupted. "The Covenant CCS is charging its Plasma Turrets, as well as its Energy Projector. I need to ready the Pulse

now!"

Agnes stopped cold. \_We're not ready.\_ He thought, assessing how much power they'd just used on the MAC. \_There's no way.\_

"Sir, I have to do it now!"

"Are you sure you can get enough charge, Delilah?" Agnes asked. "Are you one-hundred-percent certain that you can stop their entire assault?"

"Well, no." The AI admitted. "But it's our only chance. If we can't, they'll total the whole fleet."

The Vice Admiral bit his lip. With that many guns firing at once, as well as the Assault Carrier waiting in the wings, it was one time in which he was wishing for a normal shield-system. The Pulse, simply put, couldn't stop everything, especially if the shots were staggered at all.

"Do it." He said. "It's our only option. Get the Pulse's charge as high as you can. I don't care what we lose. Do it."

"Yes sir."

Almost instantly, all light in the bridge, save for the holographic panel in the center, was lost.

\_Perfect,\_ Agnes thought. \_We're fighting in the dark.\_

"Sir," one man said who was seated at a nearby powerless terminal. "What happens if the Covenant don't fire everything at once? What happens if they decide to wait in between shots?"

Agnes shook his head bitterly. "Then we're dead," he said. "And there's not a damn thing we can do about it."

\* \* \*

><p>"How long do we have to hover out here?" Landon asked impatiently. Zulu Company had successfully departed from the docking bay, and their Prowler was now drifting in the dead of space, safe from attack due its typical ONI-style stealth equipment.<p>

"We're technically not 'hovering,' per se." Stephanie answered.

"Don't be a smart-ass." Landon retorted. "I just wanna know how long we get to sit around and, once again, not do a damn thing."

"We'll be out here until they damage the shields on the Assault Carrier." Samuel said casually. In truth, however, he was annoyed with that particular decision. He was given direct orders early on that, no matter what, they were to wait until either the Assault Carrier was damaged, or the entire human fleet was destroyed before they could try to board.

And that was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard.

\_There's not even a guarantee that they'll be able to break the

shields on the Assault Carrier. And, even if they do, we still don't have proof that there's a Prophet on-board.\_ He gritted his teeth inside his helmet. Once again, Zulu Company was being used as the Office of Naval Intelligence's own personal expendable army.

He sighed and took a breath. There was no reason to worry about it now. Slowly, the giant Spartan turned to his closest teammate, who just happened to be Blaine.

"Hey," he said, getting the white-clad soldier's attention. "Take someone with you and go see what we've got in the way of arms. I'm not in the mood to play the Training Ground game all over again."

Blaine nodded. "Sure," he said. "Hey Zeke, come on."

And, as Samuel had expected, the other Spartan's typical response: "What do you want?"

"We're gonna see what we've got for weapons." When no response came, Blaine finished, "don't make me drag your ass."

Ezekiel shrugged. "Fine," he said. "But there better be some damned rifle-ammo in here." With that, he followed Blaine through a door from the "bridge" of the somewhat tiny ship.

"This Prowler's not standard-issue," Jason said suddenly. He was poking around the controls. "For starters, it doesn't have its own AI. It's controlled by Delilah back on the Atonement." Samuel turned toward him, but he was already speaking again, "not only that, but it's obviously been adapted to serve as a boarding craft. That alone is quite a feat for, well, ONI."

"What else is different?" Sam asked.

"I don't know." Jason admitted, shrugging. "We probably won't know until we go back to Earth and ask-"

"I'll tell you what's different!"

It was Blaine's voice coming from the back. And he sounded angry.

No, 'angry' is an understatement. He was pissed.

"We don't have any damned weapons!" He shouted, coming back onto the bridge. He was holding something in both hands at his waist, and it looked kind of awkward. When he saw Samuel looking down at it, he added, "and yes, I am holding a damn Flamethrower." When everyone straightened up and looked directly at it, he added, "but no, there's nothing in it."

Sam's eyes went wide. "Are you sure there aren't any weapons?"

"There are nine Flamethrowers and God-only-knows how many containers of Pyrosene in the back." Blaine shook his head and threw the Flamethrower as hard as he could into one of the titanium walls. "This isn't a Prowler at all! This is a remodeled Deforestation and Reconstruction Vessel! Damn it!"

Stephanie reacted first. "Are you kidding? They can't do that-"

"Oh, that's just great!" Landon's voice came next.

Samuel clenched his fists at his sides, working to keep his calm.

"Screwed again!" a voice shouted as the door to the bridge opened once more. Immediately, he recognized it as Zeke's. "Should've known," he snapped as he walked inside. "Freakin' ONI spooks; I swear, I'm gonna rip their heads right off their shoul-"

"Okay!" Samuel yelled. "We got it! That's enough, from everyone." He calmed down, trying to focus. "We'll work with what we've got. Anyone who thinks they can work with a Flamethrower, grab one. Otherwise, be quiet and let me think until we board."

Suddenly, dead silence echoed inside the ship. The only sound to be heard for several seconds was Samuel's own breathing inside his helmet. \_Oh my,\_ he thought, pondering their situation. Really, it wasn't as big of a deal as it could've been. In all fairness, they'd been unarmed against Covenant forces before.

Mostly, the poor aliens just served as walking caches.

Samuel rolled his eyes. "Poor" aliensâ€|right.

"Uh, Sam," Victoria said nervously, as if she was afraid that he would enforce his silence rule.

"Yeah, Vic?" he said.

"Look out the window."

Samuel turned and glanced out the large viewing window that showed the two fleets, untold miles away in the middle of space. Still, they were large from where he was standing.

And one side was glowing.

The two remaining Covenant ships were staggered only slightly, and both of them were lit up like Christmas trees, glowing from end to end. And, on the other side, the \_Atonement\_ was completely dark.

"What's going on out there?" Stephanie asked, moving toward the window.

Samuel started to answer but, after a second, realized that he really didn't have one for her. "I'm not sure." He said.

And then, they fired. Over twenty streaking bolts of plasma, plus a pair of Energy Projectors tore across the empty space, engulfing any Seraphs or \_Longswords\_ unlucky enough to be in the way. When they were roughly three-fourths of the way to the UNSC formation, the \_Atonement\_ lit up for a split second in white light, and Samuel watched as the Covenant's plasma bolts and torpedoes broke apart, forming thin walls of superheated matterâ€|or just detonating in the middle of the blackness.



But the Pulse didn't take them all. Six bolts of streaming plasma were still headed straight for the formation, and three of them were aimed right at the head of the Atonement of Reach.

\* \* \*

><p>"We couldn't stop them all." Delilah said as the lights in the Atonement began to return. "There are still six more incoming. Evasive maneuvers won't be enough. Impact in twelve seconds!"

"Damn it!" Agnes shouted. He spun in a half-circle, looking at everyone he could on the bridge. "Brace for impact!"

The responses were immediate. Some people curled up in their chairs; the ones that were standing braced themselves against walls or desks, preparing for the worst. Even Agnes took a deep breath, ready for the impact that would end it all.

But there was no impact. Something detonated before the monitors returned, out in front of the Atonement, and it shook the giant ship from end to end, but no damage was sustained.

Agnes immediately knew the answer.

Something had gotten in the way.

Silently, he prayed that it wasn't the Spartans, that it wasn't Zulu Company. They were the only ones who could, for certain, go and dispose of the Prophet, if there was one on the Assault Carrier. Without them, it would cost countless lives to be sure that a Prophet was on board, and probably even more to kill it.

Finally, the monitors returned to full power, and he had his answer.

While there was no question that the UNSC Dauntless and the Destroyer called the Chimera were obliterated, judging by the spurting flames coming from their melted holes and the hundreds of tiny detonations occurring inside, the UNSC Contender was actually the only ship that the Vice Admiral could look at.

According to the records that Delilah was pulling up on the monitors gauging their power routing, the Contender, during those last few moments, had put its engines into overdrive, pushing its way in front of the Atonement as fast as it could go. The ship had even turned sideways, maximizing the damage that it would take, but somehow saving Agnes and his crew.

"Oh my God," a woman said nearby. Agnes could only guess that she was staring at the same screen he was: the one that showed white-hot, glistening pieces of the UNSC Contender floating in the emptiness of space.

Agnes started breathing hard, suddenly furious, both with the Covenant and with himself for having to have God-only-knew how many soldiers sacrifice their lives to save his, and to save his ship. His fists clenched subconsciously at his sides.

"Alright!" he shouted, his tone half-rallying and half-infuriated. "That's it! These sons-of-bitches have lived for far too long!" He pointed to the monitor, allowing everyone to see. "You see that? That's what's left of the UNSC Contender!" He paused, catching his breath. "They took those shots so we wouldn't have to! They gave their lives so that we could keep ours, and so that we could finish what we started!"

He turned to Delilah, who was watching from her digital perch.

"Sir?" she asked.

"Ready the Archer Missiles and charge the Plasma Torpedoes. We're destroying that damned Battlecruiser, and we're doing it right the Hell now!"

"Yes sir," she answered, and vanished.

"And the rest of you," he said, turning to the crew. "If you're religious, pray to whoever it is you pray to. If you're not, thank your lucky stars or ask the rubber band of fate to stretch just a little bit further or whatever the Hell it is you do, because, starting right now, nothing else matters but that Assault Carrier. And if that means that I have to ram the Atonement straight into the damn thing, then you'd better get ready for some up-close-and-personal combat, because that's exactly what I'll do!"

"Sir, yes sir!" was the most common response, with several salutes and a flurry of nodding heads. After a few deep breaths, everyone turned their backs to Agnes and once again buried themselves in their work.

"That's right," he whispered, staring at the Covenant ships on the holographic panel. "We're coming for you. And mark my words: whether or not this is our last standâ€¦I will make sure that it's yours."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Well, that's 42. I know, I know...it was probably NOT worth the month-long wait. I do apologize. I'm not nearly as fond of it as I was number 41. However, next chapter, the Spartans will do a full-on assault on the Assault Carrier and the (rather unlucky) Covenant forces inside. However, don't get the wrong idea and assume everything will go too smoothly...<strong>

#### 44. Chapter 43: Boarding Action

\*\*Author's Notes: Well, I'm on track so far! I recently re-did my outline for this story (no new material, just re-wrote titles and compressed some things, etc), and it looks like I'll be working on it for a little longer than originally anticipated. Hopefully not too long (not because I don't love it, but because I want to start the second one sometime soon, lol). Still, I'm gonna try to get some more out to you guys as fast as possible, without compromising quality any more than Writer's Block makes me (and I apologize for that). That being said, it's Review Time:\*\*

**\*\*REVIEWS:\*\***

**\*\*Mhop12:** lol, you're getting ahead of me! Thanks for reviewing, and I'll, uh, address that point this chapter. ;)\*\*

**\*\*Lord Zander:** I like your analogy for the Atonement. As you said, it's well-powered, well-armored (mostly), and, in a one-on-one fight, I'd put my money on it in a heartbeat. But, quantity does count for something. Power only goes so far. Also, the Riddick movie that you mentioned, now that I think about it, could be possible inspiration, but I honestly can't ever recall seeing it. However, I did see Pitch Black, so...maybe, lol. Thanks for reviewing, and thanks for the empathy in regards to...well, my time-constraints. I think everyone has them, in their own regard.\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** I am alive! Sorry, I'd have e-mailed you back, but I was just swamped. My bad. Oh, and thank you very much for the good birthday wish. I can assure you, it was a blast. :) As for the actual story...well, yes, Landon is pretty much out of his freakin' mind. lol. And Zeke...well, you'll just have to wait and see how he, umm...copes...with what happened. Oh, and I'm really, really happy with that response to the Vice Admiral's speech. That is exactly what I was going for. I'll say no more though. Thanks very much for your review!\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey, no worries about getting it late! Honestly, I went a month without posting. I can't expect people to get it immediately. Heck, half of you probably thought I WAS dead, lol. Still, I can tell you now, Zulu will be causing some serious havoc. You're gonna love it. ;)\*\*

**\*\*Bally3000:** That's great! Personally, I'm not big on my Intro, but I hope that you'll find that the story gets progressively better for the most part, and I really hope you like it enough to stick around! Thanks for reviewing, as well!\*\*

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** Hola! Hey, I promise, no cliff-hanging more than I have to, lol. Seriously though, I hope that the busy schedule slows down some so that I can actually get back to this. By the way, sorry you were out here yesterday and I wasn't around for the vast majority of it...again, I wasn't, uh, completely informed. Oh well, just a mix-up. Hope to catch you next time you're out! Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** It's good to be back! Actually though, while this chapter is the finish of the space-fighting, it is also the warm-up to Zulu's real mayhem aboard the Assault Carrier. So, I hope you like what's on the way! Oh, and I agree, very poor luck. ;) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*AosUnderSol:** Hey! It's good to hear from you as well! The spooks, you ask? Well, you'll see just a little more from them this time around also. And I think there's even a reference similar to your comment about Zeke and Blaine in here, lol. Thanks for reviewing, and I hope you like what's on the way!\*\*

**\*\*Lecter42:** I'm glad you liked the last chapter. Admittedly, it wasn't as good as I would've liked, but it got mostly good responses. Also, in answer to your questions:  
>(1) CCS, as far as anyone knows, probably stands for Covenant

Capitol Ship...but, the funny part is that nowhere in the Halo canon is there a clear, definitive answer.<br>(2) I promise, I have not forgotten. I will do my best and incorporate some of it in hopefully very soon down the line. However, I'm just not quite there yet. But, as said, I have not forgotten. :)<br>>Oh, and thank you for the welcome, lol. I've heard that statement quite a bit lately. ;) lol. Thanks for reviewing!<strong>

**\*\*Jimbo1Kenobee:** Thank you very much for the kind words! It was actually really, really nice to read after being so down about this last chapter. It just took so long, I'm working on finding my rhythm again, if you know what I mean. Still, thank you so much for reviewing, and I hope not to disappoint!\*\*

**\*\*Samus 117:** lol, thanks! I'm not sure if crazy is good or bad though... ;) No, seriously, I hope you like this next one too. It's not the best in the world, but I did really work on it, and it'll lead into the on-ship combat nicely.\*\*

**\*\*armoured-blade:** Well, you are like me, in that you really didn't care for the last one. I understand, and, in answer to what you said, this is all I have: the dogfighting, I would have loved to do better, but it was really, really difficult for me. I re-wrote it about eight times, and I just never could get a real flow for it, mostly, I think, because of a lack of any real info on how the Longswords maneuver, their propulsion and direction, etc. Do realize I'm not out to make excuses, only to assure you that I did the very best I could. As for character insight...well, there's slightly more of that here.\*\*

**\*\*Now, in regards to your questions and comments:**  
>(1) In the event that the Atonement is destroyed...well, that's covered this chapter. No worries. :)<br>(2) Magnus is also addressed in this chapter. I've got you covered. ;)<br>>(3) I'm really trying to get by this last chapter. Hopefully you'll be slightly more impressed with this one...still, you are absolutely right in regards to school and the after-school work. It's ungodly.<br>(4) I will work on your complimentary situations...if you would like, you could e-mail me though, and give me some idea as to what you're looking for. I mean, I think have a general idea, but if you have something you're specifically looking for, feel free to let me know. :)<br>>(5) I took your advice on Stephanie as well and worked on her just a little bit this chapter. Expect more for her too.<br>(6) And forget the spelling...mine is atrocious some days. I completely understand.\*\*

**\*\*That being said, thank you for reviewing, and I hope this one is at least a little bit better for you.\*\***

**\*\*Now, on to the chapter!\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 43:<strong>

â€" **\*\*Boarding Action** â€"

**\*\*1900 Hours - February 1, 2553\*\***

**\*\*Aboard the UNSC \_Atonement Of Reach\_ - In Orbit\*\***

"Archer Pods: armed!" Delilah said. "Plasma Torpedoes are charging, and the Covenant are still recuperating from their last attack."

"How long until we can hit them?" the Vice Admiral asked.

Delilah pondered the idea for a moment. "Just under two minutes," she said. "Thirty seconds more, if I charge the Energy Projectors." She paused, then added carefully, "which, is advised."

"Between the Archer Missiles and the Torpedoes," Agnes said, "there's no reason we shouldn't be able to completely incapacitate that Battlecruiser. Once we do, if there's anything left, let the \_Hydra\_ and the \_Prometheus\_ fire a round or two into it."

"Sir," Delilah said, "the \_Prometheus\_ doesn't have any MAC rounds left. They spent the last one on the \_CCS\_." After a second's pause, she added, "we do still have a MAC round, however."

"No," Agnes said quickly. "That last round is only to be used as a last resort and nothing else. Change of plans, though: ready the Energy Projectors. When they're three-quarters of the way charged, fire the Plasma Torpedoes and the Archer Missiles."

"Another twenty-thousand, sir?" the AI asked with the slightest hint of mockery in her voice.

"Not quite," the Vice Admiral said with a small laugh. "Open fire with four of the oversized pods."

"Four-thousand, then?"

"That's right." He answered. "Just give them something to keep them busy while we charge the Projectors. In the meantime," he looked directly at the monitor that was showing the UNSC \_Hydra\_, "relay the message to the other ships to hammer that \_CCS\_ with everything they've got."

"Yes sir," Delilah said.

"Oh, and Delilah," Agnes said.

"Yes?"

"Check on Zulu Company for me. Make sure they know that I'm well aware that they're still out there, and that we will take care of the Assault Carrier somehow."

Delilah, as she stood on her digital perch in the center of the room, seemed perplexed at the Vice Admiral's genuine acknowledgement of the Spartans as more than just "mechanized destruction," as ONI often described them.

"Yes sir," she said finally. "I will."

\* \* \*

><p>"This is bullshit." Jason muttered, only half-focused on the task at hand: counting the number of Pyrosene containers in the back of the ship. Samuel had asked him to do it in case they needed some real "firepower" to get out when they boarded the Assault Carrier.<p>

And, by "asked," he meant "ordered."

Really, the job itself wasn't the problem he was having right now, nor was it the cause of his particularly bad mood. The problem was that, while there were God-only-knew how many weapons caches back on the Atonement, all of them very easily obtained simply by going back to the ship, Zulu Company was stuck out in the middle of black space because, in typical ONI-style, their ship was being controlled by an AI they could neither see or interact with in any way, shape, or form.

"Damn it." He said, counting his two-hundred-sixty-fourth container. Or was it two-hundred-sixty-five? Jason shook his head. "Who gives a damn?" He asked aloud.

"Sam does." Stephanie's voice echoed in his ears. He knew immediately, however, that she was standing in the doorway behind him.

"Yeah," Jason answered. "Thanks for that."

"Wasn't trying to bother you," she said. "I came to see if you wanted to split the job."

Jason opened his mouth to speak, then stopped when he processed what she'd actually said. "You want to help?"

"That's what I said."

"Well, okay." He said. Jason pointed to a shelf on one side of the huge, rectangular room that was covered from end-to-end with Pyrosene containers. "If you'll count those, I'll finish this side and do that small bit over there." He pointed to a set of three small boxes, each with untold amounts of the ultra-flammable material. "Then we'll add 'em up and call it a day."

Stephanie nodded and walked over to the wall.

This is weird, Jason thought as he counted. It wasn't that Stephanie had asked to help; that wasn't it. She was always around to lend a hand. No, what was strange was that she was one of the Spartans he was least knowledgeable about. Even within Zulu Company, certain members dealt with certain other members more often.

Stephanie worked with Maulers, Shotguns, and Fuel Rod Guns. Jason worked with Brute Shots, Beam Rifles, and the occasional Rocket Launcher. Very rarely were they needed in the same area, so it wasn't often that he found himself near the female Spartan.

When it came to free-time, Stephanie was usually with Blaine, a fellow Cyborg from the abdomen up. Either that, or she was with Samuel. Or, she was Victoria, the only other woman on the team. Jason&#124;well, Jason was usually with Landon, piloting something, or

he was lifting with Blaine. Stephanie never lifted though.

Jason shook his head. It wasn't for attraction's sake that he was wondering so much. It was merely that, in comparison to the others, he knew so little about her. On the battlefield, she was almost always stone-cold. She didn't goof around, like Landon. She didn't boast. She didn't enjoy killing, like Zeke or Blaine.

She was just Stephanie.

"So what have you got?" She asked suddenly, snapping him from his thoughts.

"What?"

"How many did you count?" She asked. "You clearly haven't been counting for a few minutes, so how many did you get?"

"Um, well," Jason's mind ran in circles, trying to come up with a plausible answer. "I counted twice," he said finally, "and I got different numbers. I'm getting ready to go over it again."

Stephanie laughed, and Jason could only imagine she was rolling her eyes. "Don't bother." She said. "There are three-hundred on my wall, and yours is four short of that. As for over there," she pointed to the boxes of Pyrosene containers, "I'm guessing about thirty to a case, but you could count those to make sure." There was an air of suggestion in her voice.

"Right," Jason said, "sure." And, with that, he stopped thinking and opened the first case.

\* \* \*

><p>"Firing on the Covenant <em>CCS<em> in twenty-seconds," Delilah said over the speakers. "Four-thousand Archer Missiles and two Plasma Torpedoes, plus whatever the \_Prometheus\_ and the \_Hydra\_ have left."

"Alright," Agnes said, watching the two alien ships on the monitors. "It's time to send these bastards back into the holes they crawled out of. Open fire!"

All monitors showing anything in front of the \_Atonement\_ flashed bright white multiple times as thousands of explosive missiles were suddenly unleashed into the blackness of space, along with two bolts of streaming plasma.

Statistics came up on a screen to the Vice Admiral's left, showing what the remaining ships had contributed to the attack. Nothing much, but each one had fired whatever Archer Missiles they had left.

"How close are the Projectors?" Agnes asked.

"The Energy Projectors will be fully charged in ninety-eight seconds." Delilah said, "and counting."

"The second they're ready," Agnes said, "you have my permission: open fire on the \_CCS\_-Battlecruiser."

The digital image of the AI nodded. "Yes sir."

The Vice Admiral let a ghost of a grin crawl onto his face. This was it. Until the shots connected or the Covenant made their next attack, there was nothing left to be done. All he could do was wait.

\* \* \*

><p>Meanwhile, Samuel was standing next to the window in the Spartans' supposed "Prowler," trying to figure out their next move. The others were either on the bridge or in the very back, checking on supplies, and Samuel now had peace to contemplateâ€¦to plan.<p>

He knew that once they got aboard the ship, they would almost certainly have to split up to keep the Prophet from retreatingâ€¦if there was even one on-board.

\_Ridiculous,\_ he thought for the fifth time in the last few minutes. It just didn't make sense. At the very most, all that should've been required of Zulu Company was that they would board, find out for sure if a Prophet was on the ship, and then turn right back around and leave.

And then, as Blaine had said so eloquently sometime before, "bomb the Hell out of the damn thing."

But, for some reason, ONI was desperate to send the Spartans in, to see the Prophet die with their own eyes. Samuel silently laughed at the notion that they might change their orders and tell Zulu Company to attempt to capture the Prophet.

That wouldn't end well; certainly not. There would be one dead Prophet, a group of court-marshaled Spartans, and a (much larger) group of dead ONI operatives, if Sam was unlucky enough to lose his grip on Zeke or Blaine.

"Spartans," a female voice sounded in his head, and also somewhere behind him. For a moment, Samuel thought it was Gael, but recognized it as Delilah's a moment later.

"What is it?" He asked, though he was sure that her image was appearing all over the ship, and not just in the small corridor he had taken up residence in.

"As you can see by looking out the window," the AI said, "we are firing on the \_CCS\_ now. As soon as it has been dispatched, we will move on and attack the Assault Carrier. At that point, I will guide the ship into one of the alien ship's open launch bays and, after you get out, seal it until your return."

Samuel took this as his chance to ask a question. "Delilah," he said. "What happens if the \_Atonement\_ is attacked? If you're controlling this craft now, how will we take control if something happens?"

The AI's voice was completely monotone, flat-lined. "In the event that I can no longer pilot the ship," she said, "you are to install an AI of your own into the central controls. Either one should be more than capable of finishing the job."

"Fair enough," Samuel said. "That's all."



Delilah's digital image nodded briefly, and vanished.

And Samuel turned to watch the fireworks. There were untold numbers of Archer Missiles and two Plasma Torpedoes tearing through space, toward the two Covenant ships, which appeared to be unfazed by the oncoming assault.

At least, the one in back â€" the Assault Carrier â€" was.

The \_CCS\_, on the other hand, appeared to be aiming Point-Defense Plasma-based weapons, and Seraphs were swarming the Archer Missiles, trying desperately to shoot down as many as possible.

\_Not that it matters,\_ Sam thought, \_they can't possibly get them all. And when the \_CCS\_ is taken care of, it'll be our turn.\_

\* \* \*

><p>At another window in the small ship, three more members of Zulu Company were watching the assault anxiously, waiting for something to go wrong and send the entire plan into chaos. Typically, this was the perfect time for some unknown, fate-based force to come in and blast the whole scenario straight to Hell.<p>

Of course, the ones waiting for it were Landon, Blaine, and Ezekiel.

"Fifty-bucks says that the \_CCS\_ doesn't go down." Landon said, apparently not really caring which Spartan answered.

"I'll take that bet." Blaine said, shaking his head as he said it. "You know vehicles, Landon, but the way you gauge explosives is pathetic. Trust me, the \_CCS\_ is done. The Assault Carrierâ€|well, that's another matter entirely."

"I'll take both your bets," Zeke said, "and double them. The \_CCS\_ will burn. Immediately after, the Assault Carrier will launch a counter-attack. I'm guessing it wipes out the whole damn fleet with it, too."

Landon turned to the other soldier, seemingly surprised by the comment. "You don't really think soâ€|"

"Yeah," he said, "I do. Our luck is easily that bad, and theirs hasn't been all that great either."

"But still," Landon said. "There's no way. That Assault Carrier couldn't wipe out all four ships in one go." He shook his head furiously. "There's just no way."

"I forgot about the \_Ares\_." Zeke said. "I change my bet. It'll fry every ship but the Carrier."

"You're such a pessimist." A female voice suddenly echoed inside Blaine's helmet, along with the helmets of the other two Spartans. He recognized the voice as Victoria's.

"I'm not a pessimist." Zeke retorted. "I'm a realist."

"Uh-huh," she said, unimpressed. "Whatever." She turned to Blaine. "You didn't find anything in the back except pyro-stuff, right?"

"Yeah," the Cyborg answered. "That's all; just a bunch of damn pyrosene."

Victoria nodded. "Alright," she said. "This is gonna be harder than we thought."

"What have we got?" Landon asked, "collectively, I mean?"

The indigo-armored Spartan shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "I think we've got two swords, four Shotguns, a Battle Rifle, a Rocket Launcher, several M6G Pistols, two Plasma Pistols" She trailed off, thinking. After a second, she added, "oh yeah; and Blaine's hammer, of course."

"That's not so bad." Landon said. "We definitely could be worse-off."

Victoria shrugged again. "Normally, yes," she said. "But this time, I think we might be in a little deep. Everything I just named, save for the swords and the hammer, have very little ammunition in them. No one grabbed anything from the Atonement because we were supposed to have some ammo here."

"It's not that big a deal," Blaine said, considering it. "Granted, I was pissed when I found out that we got screwed over once again by the spooks at ONI HQ, but, really, it's not worth worrying about. We'll go in, kill everything in sight, take their weapons, and be right back to where we normally are."

"That works for you, hammer-man," Zeke snapped. "But some of us require UNSC-made weapons-"

"Like your precious rifle?" Blaine asked sarcastically. He rolled his eyes. "Please. It's a Covenant spaceship. You don't need a damned rifle, you big girl."

"Keep talking," the smaller Spartan said. "We'll see how far that hammer gets you with someone a little faster than the average Brute."

Blaine laughed loudly, not even trying to suppress it. "Try it!" He said in between chuckles. "See how far it gets you. You'll look funny smashed up against one of these walls like an oversized Drone."

"Funny," Zeke said. He drew a long breath like he was going to speak, but stopped suddenly as a bright light shot through the windows in the room. Blaine turned just in time to see the Plasma Torpedoes connect with the CCS-Battlecruiser, even as hundreds of Archer Missiles detonated against its shields.

"Wow," he said, "the V.A. didn't hold anything back, did he?"

"Just the MAC round," Victoria said.

"Oh yeah," Landon said, apparently realizing. "He has one

more."

"That's right." She answered. "I'm still puzzled as to why he hasn't fired the thing yet. I would have."

"And that's why you're not in charge of a spaceship." Zeke quipped.

"Who asked you?" She asked.

"No one," he admitted. "But if I only spoke when I was asked toâ€¦well, I wouldn't get nearly the practice I do." He shrugged.

"Wouldn't get anyâ€¦" Blaine muttered, watching as, finally, the shield on the \_CCS\_ collapsed, and Archer Missiles began to crash into its hull and detonate by the dozen. The two Plasma Torpedoes had done their job.

"Well, damn," Landon said, looking at Blaine. "It looks like you win the bet."

Blaine nodded. "I told you: your observation skills in regards to explosives areâ€¦" He drifted off, then finished, "well, they could use some work."

"Don't forget," Zeke said, "I have a say in this bet too."

"Whatever." Blaine said. "Even if it mounts a counter-attack, it won't take the whole fleet. Trust me; it doesn't have the firepower to take the \_Atonement\_, as well as everything else out there."

As the sentence left his mouth, the \_Atonement\_ lit up once again, firing both Energy Projectors straight at the now-stationary \_CCS\_-Battlecruiser. With no shields to stop them, the Projectors tore straight through the hull and decks, cutting right into the heart of the Covenant craft and reacting with its plasma-based generator.

Not two seconds later, the entire ship collapsed, detonating in a series of six violent explosions. Each one sent huge chunks of alien metal soaring through space and caused plumes of fire to burn in the darkness. And, in a few moments, it was over. The \_CCS\_ was reduced to smoldering pieces of scrap.

"Well, I owe you fifty." Landon said reluctantly. Blaine turned to say something, but Ezekiel interrupted.

"Don't pay up too soon." He said. When Blaine looked at him, he was pointing out the window.

The Assault Carrier was lit up in half-a-dozen different colors, all over its massive form. From what the Spartans could see, every inch of the ship might as well have been gathering energy.

"Oh, shit." Blaine said. He knew as well as any of them: all Hell was about to break loose.

\* \* \*

><p>"Incoming attack from the Assault Carrier!" Delilah shouted, her voice sounding all around the bridge. "Taking evasive maneuvers."<p>

Agnes cursed under his breath. He'd been afraid of that. In all fairness, there was nothing to be done about it. Either he attacked the \_CCS\_, or he didn't. It wouldn't go down if he didn't attack it and, if it didn't go down, he couldn't get to the Assault Carrier.

Although, if he could have, he would've just fired the last MAC round at them both and skewered the whole damn Covenant resistance in one swift move.

But no; that was against orders. Even a Vice Admiral had bosses; Agnes had learned that the hard way. And, unfortunately, one of his bosses was a woman, Cassandra Rose. She was a "higher-up" in the Office of Naval Intelligence and, as far as he knew, she never left HIGHCOM. Hell, she couldn't even be bothered to give Agnes her orders personally.

No, instead, Rick Agnes got the 'pleasure' of getting his orders delivered to him by one of her most infuriating subordinates: Rex Sauter. To be fair to the Vice Admiral, Agnes was the type of man who, despite a person's demeanor or attitude, would always respect those who were higher on the ladder than he was. He took his orders with a salute and a "yes sir" at all times, and rarely â€" if ever â€" had any hard feelings toward his superiors.

But Rex Sauter, for all intents and purposes, was an obsequious, two-faced bastard. The man could lie, cheat, and steal with the best of them. Worst of all, he'd make you question yourself and your entire mentality the whole time he was doing it. He'd even tried to do it when Vice Admiral Agnes had questioned the orders the young operative had delivered to him.

"You are not to do anything that would jeopardize the life of the Prophet aboard the Assault Carrier." The message had said all-too-clearly. "Allow the Spartans to do their job. They will be told once they have the situation in hand what to do."

The Vice Admiral's fists clenched as he watched the Assault Carrier continue to charge its plasma-weapons. Everything it had it was sure to throw at them now. And they had no time to charge the Pulse, or mount any sort of defense.

And all because the "powers-that-be" wanted to capture a Covenant Prophet.

"What are our chances, Delilah?" Agnes said, shaking his head and attempting to push the thoughts out. "How likely is it that we'll escape with minimal damage?"

"Not very," she answered immediately. "The Assault Carrier is charging a pair of Plasma Torpedo Launchers and a trio of Energy Projectors. When it fires, my estimate is that it will target the \_Hydra\_ with both torpedoes, the \_Prometheus\_ with one Projector, and then hit us with the last two."

"Can you get us behind some of the wreckage from the other UNSC ships?" Agnes asked painfully. It killed him to think of using them for cover again, after they'd already given their lives.

"Negative," the AI answered. "Not in time. The Projectors will hit us almost instantly. I'm moving in that direction now but, unless they purposely wait, or they have charging issues, we'll never make it."

"Well then, let's pray for a malfunction." Agnes said, crossing his two fingers behind his back. "In the meantime, let's prep our own counter-attack."

The AI's digital image turned to face him, awaiting orders.

"Charge the Energy Projectors." He said. "We can't ready the Pulse in time, but I'll take the next best thing."

"Yes sir." Delilah said. "But, what about the MAC Gun? I could have it ready in not much more time than what the Projectors will take, since they have to cool."

Agnes gritted his teeth. After several seconds, he finally sighed, defeated. "No." He said. "Just ready the Projectors." It was amazing how, in only five words, the Vice Admiral felt like he had signed his own death warrant.

"Alright," Delilah said. "Charging Projectors."

The Vice Admiral wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead. This is it. He thought. A second later, he pulled up a link with the Ares.

\* \* \*

><p>"Commander," the Vice Admiral's voice echoed over the intercom system aboard the UNSC Ares. "What are the odds that you have a MAC Gun ready to back us up?"

"Slim to none," Commander Luther Black answered coldly. "This ship was in for repairs when the attack commenced. One of the things not yet fixed, of course, is the MAC. We're just here for support with the Longswords."

"Damn it," Agnes said. "Alright, well, wish us luck, Commander."

"Best of luck, sir," Black answered casually and with false enthusiasm.

In truth, however, there was more to the UNSC Ares than any other ship in the fleet was aware of, including the Atonement. While it was true that its most prominent role in the battle would be to tend to the Longsword fighters, it had another, very important quality.

The highest powers in the Office of Naval Intelligence, according to what Black had been told, didn't trust Rick Agnes not to attack the Assault Carrier if things got a little troublesome. And they trusted Zulu Company even less to follow orders when all was said and done

and actually attempt to capture the Covenant Prophet.

On account of this, they sent the Ares. Ninety-nine-percent of the UNSC Carrier was exactly as it should be, from staff to equipment to armament. However, the Ares also housed six higher-class ONI operatives " all disguised as average, run-of-the-mill soldiers " and one soldier that, up until this point, had kept an exceedingly low profile.

"Go get him," Black said to one of his associates in the room. He had to be vague, lest the rest of the crew find out who he was talking about. It was all strictly need-to-know information and, as the case usually was, these men simply didn't need to know. "Send him to my office. I'll be there in five minutes."

"Yes sir," the spook answered, and hustled out of the bridge.

Soon, Black thought. Soon, we'll see just what we--

"Commander Black!" the Vice Admiral's voice echoed again over the intercom. "The Covenant are about to open fire. If we don't make it out of this, you have to contact Zulu Company and give them the OK to go in! You have to finish this."

Black shook his head. "Yes sir," he said, detached. "I'll contact the Spartans."

The Vice Admiral didn't have time to answer again, because the monitors on the bridge of the Ares began to light up, showing oncoming fire from the Assault Carrier. Black watched, stunned, as three Energy Projectors opened fire on Earth's resistance.

In two seconds flat, one of the beams had hit and penetrated the hull of the Prometheus, and the UNSC Frigate began to melt down, fire rippling along its surface as its hull gave way and its reactor detonated.

At the same time, two of the blasts hit the front of the Atonement of Reach. Black knew: this was the scenario that everyone had been afraid of. The Atonement was an experimental ship at its core, and anything could happen when hit with heavy direct fire. Hell, if they were truly unlucky, the Antimatter core could rupture, and then every last one of them, the whole damn solar system, would be no more.

Still, the Atonement held up better than expected. Of course, the two massive Covenant weapons burned gaping holes in pieces of its front, but Agnes was a smart man. Black knew that he'd just drain the oxygen from them, seal them shut, and be done with it. Nothing, at least that the Commander could see, had breached the core or any critical points on the ship, so the Assault Carrier's attacks, ultimately, would be for nothing.

Even as he watched the Atonement, however, Luther Black could see two Plasma Torpedoes from the corner of his eye. Both of them were on a straight course for the UNSC Hydra, Earth's last working Destroyer. There was no way that a lower-class ship would survive them both. The Hydra was as good as scrap.

"Commander Black," the operative that he had spoken to earlier was suddenly speaking to him.

"What?"

"We can't find him." He said, lowering his head.

Black, in an instant, lost his temper and exploded on the lower-class operative. "What do you mean you can't find him?" He yelled. His tone and the volume of his voice were enough to make even the most experienced soldier cringe. "He's eleven-feet tall and green! How the Hell can you not find him?"

"Well," the man whispered, "sir, we're not sure, but we think he might've taken a Longsword."

Black gritted his teeth, trying hard not lose his temper more than he already had. "Find him," he growled. "And do it now. I want him here. Do you hear me? Right here!" he pointed his finger directly at his shoes.

Immediately, the man sprinted from the room once again.

"Damn it," Black growled, narrowing his eyes as he thought of the green-armored soldier. That Spartan had been the very epitome of insubordinate, ever since he was first taken from the Training Ground. He'd challenged his superiors at each and every turn. Not only that, he'd made their lives Hell because no amount of "training" could get him to respond appropriately when given an order. He was only kept around because, for some reason, he kept surviving the damned augmentations. Three times someone had proposed to have him decommissioned for his actions.

Three times, they were overruled.

But this, this was more than the Commander could take. This was beyond insubordinate. This was outright disobedience of direct orders and taking dangerous actions without any semblance of clearance from a higher authority.

Still, Black, regardless of his rank, could do nothing but grind his teeth and wait for the operative to return, no doubt with bad news. The Spartan was good for that. "Damn it," he said again. "Damn it, Magnus."

\* \* \*

><p>"Status!" the Vice Admiral shouted as the <em>Atonement</em> continued to rock all around him. A pair of shots from the Energy Projectors had all but ripped one front-most section of the giant Cruiser right off. In addition, the lights were now flickering incessantly.

"Sir," Delilah said, "we've sustained moderate damage to the starboard side, and minor damage to port. I'm sealing off damaged sections now." Several seconds passed in silence, but, eventually, she continued, "in addition, the shock from the two blasts has compromised the integrity of the magnetic fields holding our Antimatter reactor in place. I have to shut it down."

"What?" Agnes yelled, stunned. "What do you mean 'shut it down'? If we lose the reactor, the Atonement's reduced to nothing more than an expensive flashlight." He clenched his fists as he came to the only decision he could see. "We can't shut them down. We have to end this."

"Sir, we can't." The AI protested. "If the core ruptures, as you well know, we can forget about Earth. We can forget all about this whole system. The Antimatter would be enough to annihilate each and every planet for--"

"Thank you, Delilah," The Vice Admiral said, conceding. "I understand." A moment later, he appeared to get his second wind. "But they can't fire on us again yet. Finish readying the Energy Projectors. Open fire on the Assault Carrier." He sighed. "Then shut us down."

Delilah took a minute to process the information but, after a time, her digital image nodded approvingly and vanished from the panel.

Agnes cursed under his breath a second later when he happened to glance at one of the monitors. It showed two glowing streaks of plasma from the Covenant ship. "How long until those torpedoes hit the Hydra?" he asked, really not wanting to call the AI back from her duties, but wanting even less to be caught off-guard by another outside detonation.

"Twenty-seconds," Delilah answered dispassionately. Agnes guessed that that was her passive way of telling him that she was busy.

The Vice Admiral sighed and watched the monitors in silence, waiting for the torpedoes to hit the Hydra and, inevitably, take it down. Slowly, almost unbearably so, the bolts of plasma closed in on the UNSC craft and, finally, struck against the ship's hull. Even fully-armored, the Destroyer was a poor match for the firepower, and the superheated plasma blazed through the ship, piece by piece, first cutting through walls and floors, then utterly destroying everything in its path.

And, as Agnes watched the destruction aboard the Hydra, he realized that, after the Contender, the Prometheus, the Dauntless, the Chimera, and the Daedalus, his mind simply couldn't process any more. His body and mind were emotionless, cold to the idea that so many soldiers were dying in the empty vacuum of space.

And he hated it.

Normally, there was nothing that Agnes hated so much as the deaths of Earth's soldiers, men and women who had committed everything to fighting for humanity's future. Every time he read a report or saw a video feed showing the Covenant slaughtering some poor planet's last defense, his fists would clench and, in a few seconds, inevitably slam into something nearby, be it a wall, computer, or, in the most dire of situations, the very monitor he was looking at.

But now, somehow, as the Hydra detonated in front of his eyes and thousands of soldiers lost their lives, Agnes felt nothing. That is, nothing but hate. He hated the Covenant. He hated the aliens that had attacked Reach. He hated the ones that were attacking Earth now. He



hated them all.

And they were all going to die.

"Delilah," he said, his voice almost a whisper, "fire the Projectors. Then shut us down."

"Sir, if we fire bef--"

"Fire now," he growled.

"Opening fire," the AI answered calmly. On her command, both of the Atonement's Energy Projectors turned loose every ounce of energy they had on the Covenant craft. As expected, at first the Assault Carrier showed nothing in the way of weakness. Its shields were strong enough to withstand the blows and keep on coming.

But, after six seconds straight of constant pounding by the Atonement's guns, the Covenant Capitol Ship's shields began to wither and die under the unrelenting fire. Finally, they shorted out entirely, and the Covenant's last remaining ship was left vulnerable.

"Now, if only we had another shot." Agnes snarled as the Energy Projectors shut down. He pounded his fists into a nearby table. "Damn it!" He could only sit and watch as the Assault Carrier began to charge again, ready to finish the Atonement, and the Ares, for good.

"Sir," Delilah said, "You should--"

"Shut us down," the Vice Admiral said, defeated. "There's nothing left for us to do."

"Well, I will," Delilah said, "but what I was going to say is that you need to see this." A monitor lit up and came to life on the right-hand wall of the bridge.

"What is that?" Agnes asked. He saw nothing but black space on the monitor with stars and planets visible in the background. But something was wrong; he noticed that immediately. Something was distorting the picture, twisting it. "What's wrong with the monitor?"

"Nothing," the AI said. "That's a Slipspace rift."

Agnes threw his arms up in the air. "Perfect!" he shouted. "Just what we needed: more Covenant reinforcements."

"It's not Covenant." Delilah said immediately. "I'm only picking up one ship. It has a UNSC marker, but no classification or number. I have no idea what it is, only that it's ours."

\* \* \*

><p>"Why the Hell did they shut down the <em>Atonement<em>?" Landon asked. "They're nothing but targets out there now."

"The blasts from the Projectors must have damaged the reactor." Jason said, shaking his head as he looked out the window. "That's really

bad luck."

"We're known for that." Ezekiel snapped. "Seriously, did you expect anything less?"

"The shields are down," Samuel said, ignoring them all. "We need to get moving. We won't have much time." With that, he turned and sprinted to the bridge.

"What is that?" Stephanie asked. She was squinting, looking out the window, but something had caught her eye far away from the initial fight. There was a small, barely-noticeable distortion that was twisting her view of the Earth.

Blaine leaned over, putting his hand on the window as a brace. After a few seconds, he clapped his hands together. "That's a Slipspace rift!" Even as he shouted it, the front end of a UNSC ship began to emerge.

Suddenly, a male voice echoed around the Spartans, coming in through the intercom system on the ship. What they didn't know immediately, was that the same voice was sounding inside the Atonement, the Ares, and the Covenant Assault Carrier.

"This is the UNSC Leviathan; I am commanding officer Admiral Michael Stanforth." The voice said. "To the Covenant Assault Carrier: I have three MAC rounds with your name stamped on the front of them. Your shields are at nothing and I can fire whenever the Hell I please. That being said, you have until I count to ten to shut down every piece of technology on that ship, save for the shield-doors to keep atmosphere in the launch bays." The Admiral paused. "Other than that, if my systems detect so much as a Grunt with a flashlight, I'll send you straight to Hell."

Every Spartan in the room turned to look at each other.

"Admiral Stanforth?" Stephanie asked. "Didn't they tell us that he was dead?"

"He was M.I.A." Zeke said. "It was after Reach."

"Alright!" the Admiral's voice came again. "That's long enough." With that, he began counting. "Oneâ€|twoâ€|"

The Assault Carrier had stopped amassing energy, but was still shining brilliant purple in the depths of space.

The Admiral's tone changed as he, apparently, grew either bored, or annoyed; Stephanie couldn't tell. "Eightâ€|nineâ€|"

Every light on the Assault Carrier went out, and the Spartans' ship began to move slowly toward it.

"That's better." Stanforth said. There was a short clicking noise, and Stephanie guessed that he was changing channels. "Now, to the Spartans that I've just been informed are here: you're free to go in and do whatever it was you were instructed to do. I can't do anything for you once you get on, though. You'll be on your own." He paused again, no doubt switching channels. "But, to any Covenant that are listening: I'm asking, please give me one good reason, just one, and

I will reduce your giant, illustrious Capitol Ship to nothing but an alien-covered pile of scrap in less than fifteen seconds, mark my words."

"This is it!" Samuel said hastily, coming into the room. "We're on the way. ETA: two minutes. And you'd better expect a welcome-party."

Victoria laughed loudly. "We always do, Sam!" A moment later, the Energy Sword in her hand flashed to life.

Stephanie loaded the Shotgun she'd brought with her. No doubt, Maulers would be better, but she'd just have to go and borrow a pair once she got on-board.

After all, this was Zulu Company; slaughtering piles of Covenant "for them" was looked at as the common person might look at something as mundane as opening a door: short, simple, and it usually had to be done if anyone was going to get anywhere.

\* \* \*

><p>Sisid stood as close to the back of the room as he could, cowering quietly behind the three-dozen Brutes that the Prophet had sent to meet the Demons when they boarded the Assault Carrier. Even though he was only a Grunt Minor, Sisid was still enlisted to help, because he was unlucky enough to be stationed in this particular hangar bay.<p>

"There," one of the Brute Majors said, pointing. Sisid, peeking around the Brutes nearby, could see the humans' ship, on its way into the hangar.

"Why don't we just keep the shield up?" Another Brute asked.

"It is up." The first one answered. "But the Prophet is sure they will get inside."

Nothing was said after that. Instead, every Covenant soldier in the room got to stand and watch as the humans' dropship connected a doorway to the energy shield and air-locked it with technology that Sisid didn't recognize. Seconds later, the shield in front of the large, eight-foot door collapsed, but left the rest intact.

"Kill the Demons on sight!" A Brute Chieftain near the front shouted as the door began to slide open. Instantly, everyone in the room had a weapon drawn, pointing straight at the ship. Slowly, the door slid open.

But no one emerged.

Sisid tried to get a better look, but he was sure of it: the door was open, but the Demons were nowhere in sight. Even so, the Grunt smelled something, and he knew immediately that it was the humans.

"Where are-?"

A Demon in white armor stepped into the doorway, holding a huge weapon on its shoulder. It fired twice, and a pair of rockets flew

into the crowd of Brutes up front, sending bloody parts flying in all directions. And then, he quickly vanished to one side of the door again.

As pieces of Brutes began falling to the ground, all Hell suddenly broke loose. Every Brute in the room began to yell and fire at the now-empty doorway. As they did so, Sisid noticed another strange smell: plasma. Something was burning. He turned to the left to see another of the Demons, this one in indigo-colored armor, ripping the back right out of a Brute Minor with two blades mounted on its elbows.

"Demon!" the Grunt shouted, pointing.

But as the Brutes turned to look, another one of them, this one in black armor, seemed to appear out of thin air, right in the center of the room, using another pair of mounted blades to cut everything around it to ribbons.

"Demons!" Sisid shouted, putting extra emphasis on the plural ending and pointing madly. Before any of the soldiers could even respond, however, Demons began to pour out of the dropship, storming into the room and tearing anything and everything in their path to shreds. Sisid got a glance at the white one again; this time it had a Gravity Hammer, and was crushing the Brute Chieftain under the weapon's massive head.

A second later, he got a glimpse of another Demon, this one as big as a Hunter and clad in brown armor. The Demon had two of the humans' Shotguns and was blasting gaping holes in any of the Brutes foolish enough to get in its way.

Suddenly, the corpse of an un-armored Brute fell in front of Sisid, bleeding profusely from the mouth and neck. Behind it, he saw the black-armored Demon once more, running straight for him.

"No!" The Grunt shouted, cowering, "Demon! Run away!"

He turned to run, but felt a sharp pain as something penetrated his back and he fell to the ground in a heap. Sisid had barely enough time to hear the footsteps of a few of his brethren before the Spike Grenade exploded.

\* \* \*

><p>"Take one," Samuel's voice echoed in the Spartans' helmets, "kill the rest."<p>

"I got one." Stephanie answered.

Ezekiel scowled. He'd planned on being the one to capture one.

\_Oh well, \_he thought, walking up behind a Brute Captain and sticking the blade on his right elbow deep into its back, angled upwards, toward the neck. He pulled it out, and the alien fell to the ground instantly.

"Victoria," Samuel said over the link, "find an open terminal and insert Gael into it. When we get done here, have her find the code to open that shield-door so that we can park the Prowler in here."

"Got it," she said, and dashed through a group of three Brutes, slicing each one's throat on her way by without even slowing down.

"And Landon," Samuel said, "I want you to get back on the Prowler and pull it in here manually."

"What?" He retorted. "Why me? Can't you see I'm killing things?" Zeke heard a loud 'BANG!' as the Shotgun fired.

"Landon," he said, "just do it."

"Okay, okay," the Spartan answered. "I'll take care of it as soon as our own little femme-fetal finds the panel."

Ezekiel rolled his eyes, slicing another of the aliens down. Looking around, he could only see three more, and Stephanie was supposed to be capturing one.

Blaine clearly had another, as it was backed into a corner, and his giant hammer was looming overhead.

But the third—that one was Zeke's. It was close to the other side of the room, near Samuel, but that didn't matter. No, Ezekiel could cover the distance in seconds. He took off on a dead sprint, heading straight for the alien. Three seconds later, he was eight feet in the air, coming down on the soldier and-

Something green hit the Brute in the back, and its armor immediately fell to the ground in pieces. Zeke readied the sword, hoping he could get down to the Brute before-

BANG!

It dropped, dead.

"Damn it, Sam!" Ezekiel shouted, landing on the ground with a soft thud. He turned to his team-leader, who was holding a Plasma Pistol in one hand, and a Battle Rifle in the other. "You couldn't just let me have it!"

"No," the brown-clad Spartan said, "I couldn't."

Before Zeke could answer, Stephanie chimed in. "Hey Sam," she said, "I got one for you."

Both Spartans turned to see her walking a Brute Minor toward them, its arms held behind its back by a Covenant Energy Tether wrapped around its wrists.

"Good," Samuel said. He pointed to a door at one end of the room. "Take him in there and find out if there's a Prophet on-board. I want an answer before we go any further."

"Got it," she said, and led the Brute away. Zeke watched as the door opened and shut behind her.

"You actually think that she'll be able to get an answer?" He asked skeptically. "I mean, it's Stephanie. She's not exactly the torturous

type."

"Maybe she will," Samuel said, "maybe she won't. In the event that she doesn't, I give the job to you. Fair enough?"

Zeke nodded, smiling. "Sure."

They didn't have to wait long, however, before the biomechanical Spartan came back out with the Brute in tow. "He's not talking." She said bitterly, pushing the Brute forward and holding it from behind.

Zeke scowled. "You're going about this all wrong." He said casually, walking up to the alien. He looked straight at its bearded face. "Open wide," he said happily.

"Die, De-"

He punched the Brute hard in the gut, causing it to lurch forward, mouth gaping and gasping for breath. When it did, he pulled out a Firebomb Grenade and stuck it in the alien's open mouth.

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel saw the change instantly. The Brute looked down at its mouth with a look of horror on its face, albeit, only for a second. A moment later, it was replaced by a look of obvious, unbridled rage.<p>

"Yes," Zeke said coldly, "that's a Firebomb. If you bite down, it blows up. A little bit will probably splash your fur and catch it on fire, but most of it will catch right inside your mouth, and then you'll burn from the inside out. Now, if you want that, go right ahead: bite down." He paused. "I really don't give a damn."

The Brute did nothing; it only stared at the three Spartans. For a second, Samuel almost felt sorry for the alien.

Almost.

"Good." Zeke continued. "Now, I have a proposition for you. This is it: if you tell me what I want to know, I'll let you go â€" unarmed, of course â€" but you can go and warn all your little Brute-buddies and tell them that the Demons are here, how many of us there are, and what we're packing. Now, granted, when it's all over, we'll almost certainly kill you all anyway, but at least this way you might come close to having some semblance of a fighting chance. Clear?"

Still, the alien only growled in response.

"Now, if you don't tell me what I want, not only will I kill you, but I'll go and slaughter every single Brute on this ship first â€" all your packmates â€" and you can watch. They won't have one clue what's going on, but they'll all die, slowly, and painfully." He paused, letting the Brute take it in. "Also, before we talk, you should know that I already know the answer to my question. I'm asking it only for clarification, and I will know immediately if you lie to me." Samuel heard the Spartan take a deep breath. "That being said, my question is simple: who is in charge of this ship?"

The Brute stared at him, barring its teeth as best it could with the Firebomb wedged in its mouth.

"Oh, right," the Spartan said, snapping his fingers, "you can't really speak with that thing in your mouth. How 'bout this: you just nod when I hit the correct category. Soâ€|who makes the rules? Is it your Chieftain?"

The Brute began to nod furiously.

Samuel heard the Spartan sigh. "Now, see, we just talked about lying. I know for a fact that no low-ranking Chieftain would be put in command of a whole ship." He smacked the creature lightly on the cheek, just hard enough for the grenade to threaten to pop. Then he growled, "last chance, chimp. Is it a Chieftain?"

The alien shook its head.

"A Ship Master?"

Again, the answer was no. Samuel couldn't suppress a grin.

"A Fleet Master, perhaps?"

The Brute shook its head furiously.

"Well, who else could there be?" The Spartan asked. "There's no one higher than that, unlessâ€|" He turned toward the alien, then asked threateningly, "you're not going to suggest to me that there's a Prophet aboard this ship?" The Energy Sword flashed to life.

Even with the sword directly in front of it, the Brute nodded. It nodded again and again and again.

Zeke turned to Samuel. "There you go." He said, "all taken care of."

With that, Ezekiel turned around, but was stopped by a mix of growling and whimpering from the Brute. Samuel could see the creature nodding to the grenade in its mouth and the Energy Tether on its wrists behind its back.

"Oh," Zeke said without turning around, "I almost forgot." In one movement, he brought his leg back and let the underside of his foot connect with the beast's chin, clamping its mouth shut. As he had said, the grenade exploded, and the Brute's head was almost instantly engulfed in red and orange flame.

"Demon!" it shouted and lunged forward, but Stephanie calmly kicked the alien once in the shin, shattering it and causing the creature to fall to the ground in agony.

"You should know," Ezekiel said, "in the future: always make deals with either Samuel or Victoria, as they are the two most likely to keep them. Me? Well, I'mâ€|how should I put this?" He shrugged, giving up. "I'm a liar." Samuel could almost see the smirk on his face as the creature continued writhing on the ground. "See you in Hell."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Well, that's the majority of the major firefight in space. I do apologize for the way it ended. A lot of you, I think, if honest, would tell me that it was not nearly as good as it should've been, specifically after Chapter 41. I feel like, with so much time in between posting and such, I really just got out of my rhythm and was struggling to keep it good and worthwhile to read. That being said, I can tell you right now that, now that they're on the ship, things will get much better. I'm back in my element, so to speak, and I've got big plans for the inside of this ship. I promise you, things are now looking up.<strong>

**\*\*I hope to hear from everyone on this chapter and what they thought of the Atonement's segment as a whole. Thanks for reading!\*\***

#### 45. Chapter 44: The Return

**\*\*Author's Notes: Yeah, I know, a couple days late. I'm getting better. These past few days were busy, so that's why I'm ever-so-slightly late. That being said, I'll do reviews and get straight into the new chapter.\*\***

**\*\*REVIEWS:\*\***

**\*\*Lord Zander: Hey, thank you for the review! First, in answer to your comment about the Pulse: you're absolutely right about the way that the technology would work. The reason that I don't draw much attention to it in-story is that, because the magnetic fields holding Covenant plasma-weapons are thin anyway, they're easily dispersed. Until they're at an insanely long range, it doesn't amount to a whole lot. But, still, excellent catch. I like people paying attention and making comments like that one. As for Magnus...well, you'll just have to see.\*\***

**\*\*Taylor114: Hello again! I'm glad you liked Zeke's little, um...talk. lol. More so, I hope you and so many others get the fun you've been waiting for once Magnus makes his return (soon, I promise). The space-war, true, was not my best work, but I'm getting to the very best part of the story, wait and see. Thanks for reviewing, and I hope you like this next one as well!\*\***

**\*\*killerman83ca: lol, yeah, he's a liar. What can I say? Some things just can't be helped. Still, glad you liked it, and I hope to read some of your story again if I ever get a free moment on the internet that I'm not posting. Thanks for your review!\*\***

**\*\*Mhop12: lol, I knew Samuel would get some votes once some more people started reading the poll. He deserves them. ;) Also, I hope you're checking your e-mail this time! Thanks for the review! :)\*\***

**\*\*Lecter42: Yeah, I know...Magnus...bring him back. lol. As for Zeke...well, "sporting" is not the first word that comes to mind when trying to describe him, if you know what I mean. Oh, and in regards to Agnes: I intend on keeping him around, at least until the end of this segment. That doesn't mean I'm killing him or anything (quite the contrary), but the setting will change drastically when this is over. Finally, your comment as to the Prowler and the controlling AI:**



it's really my fault. The biggest issue in mind was a time-constraint: because no one knew when the Atonement would get its shot to take out the Assault Carrier's shields, the Spartans had to be out there and ready at any time. Sorry for that confusion. \*\*

\*\*Samus 117: lol, I'm not sure if that's good or bad that you had to stop mid-chapter, but I guess if it caused to see my profile, and then all is well. ;) And yes, I am making a story about Magnus and his trials, but it won't get started until this one is finished (that's just the way I am...one thing at a time, or nothing gets done, lol). Excellent call on his name, by the way. Finally, I love Smash Bros, and (since I finally got back on and am reading FanFics again), I will check that out. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: I'm glad you liked that one so much better than the previous! Much better! lol. Now, in regards to the chapter: first of all, I intend on doing more with Stephanie as I get further along. I slacked a lot with her persona, but I'm gonna try to fix that. About Magnus: well, he'll be along shortly. Oh, and the AI's: Well, they are difficult to write from, at least, from their Point of View. I might try it later though. We'll see. \*\*

\*\*Also, as noted, Agnes will not be "retiring" any time soon. I like him. He turned out well. I intend to keep him for some time. The Elites: well, they're around. They just have other jobs to tend to. And, in regards to your comments: no worries! I like constructive criticism, and I will hopefully be able to do another dogfight someday, and it will be longer and more in-depth. Your comments were well-placed, neutral, and polite. You have nothing to apologize for.\*\*

\*\*My schooling...well, I just finished High School (grades 9-12), and I am an incoming freshman at Miami University. However, I did a good deal of "PSEO" schooling during High School (post-secondary education option...basically, I took online college courses while I was still at High School. If you knew what that meant, my apologies. Many people around here haven't the slightest). So yes, fun fun fun. ;)\*\*

\*\*Finally, you should know: I am brainstorming to come up with ideas for "complimentary" fighting as we speak. I hope to have some cool "team-fights" before this segment (or this story) is finished. Thank you very much for your great review, and I hope I don't disappoint!\*\*

\*\*Spartan Ophir 06: Greetings! We've done our fair share of chatting since I managed to get you an e-mail, but that doesn't mean I skip your name on the list, lol. First off, as I've said a couple of times: thank you so much for the positive comments and the praises on my work. They were and are very much appreciated and it made my day to read them. I can truly only take credit for a few of the characters (and none of the ones everyone seems to love, save for Magnus, lol), as the others are based on personalities I've been in contact with my whole life. However, it's still nice to hear that they melded together so well. lol, we talked about the one qualm you had with everything...I still need to fix that. ;)\*\*

\*\*Most of the rest, we have already spoken of at least once or twice, but, again, thank you for your review and I hope that you will

continue to help me with pre-reading of chapters and with ideas as you have for this one. Your help is greatly appreciated, and I've very, very much enjoyed working and chatting with you so far. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*Jimbo1Kenobee: Glad you liked the last chapter! This next one, things are gonna heat up again and the real fighting starts back up. I'm also glad that you're looking forward to Magnus' return, as it is growing ever-closer. As for Zeke's interrogation...well, I was a fan of it too. Glad I wasn't alone. ;) Finally, thank you for your compliment on the space-battle. It was difficult for me to do, but I did enjoy that portion of this segment. \*\*

\*\*RedFlame101: Hey! Thank you for reviewing and for your compliments! Funny is something I try for, just to provide a moment or two away from the action and the killing, lol. I hope you'll keep reviewing and, even more so, I hope you enjoy what's to come!\*\*

\*\*superultramario: Thank you! This story has taken off very well, and I'm thrilled with the responses. In answer to your question: I doubt that Lord Hood will make a large appearance (if any), as, during H3, he takes off through the portal to the Ark, and doesn't return until the conclusion of the war. At that point, Zulu Company's exploits will be mostly finished. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Now, with that out of the way, I'd like to thank everyone who reviewed once again, and wish you all happy reading! Oh, and by the way, at the conclusion of this chapter, there is some good news and some bad news...don't scroll ahead. Just read and get down there in your own time. I promise: the bad news is nothing along the lines of "this story is to be discontinued or put on hiatus." Promise.\*\*

\*\*With that, to the chapter!\*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 44:<strong>

â€" \*\*The Return â€"\*\*

\*\*2100 Hours - February 1, 2553\*\*

\*\*Aboard the Covenant Assault Carrier - Outside Earth's Orbit\*\*

"Alright," Samuel started. Immediately, every Spartan in the room was at full-alert, and ready for their jobs. "Landon is in the Prowler and is getting ready to move it in here for us. Vic and Gael are working on the shield-door. With that in mind, we need to split up and get to the Prophet, ASAP."

"Sounds good," Jason said. Then, in his usual brusque disregard for grammar, "what're teams?"

It took Samuel a few seconds to settle on an answer. Even though he'd done nothing but work to figure it out on the Prowler, he was still

trying to get the best answer sorted out. "Well," he said finally, "the first thing that needs done, is that we need to take out the shield-generators for the Assault Carrier."

"What the Hell for?" Blaine asked. "We're already in here."

"We are," Sam said, "but we need to leave the Atonement and the Leviathan a shot at bringing this thing down in case we fail. To make matters worse for us, we have next to nothing in the way of weaponry. That means that, just in case, their shields need to bite the bullet, once and for all."

"And how do we go about taking out the generators?"

"Assault Carriers run on a series of fusion reactors. Judging by the ship's schematics, there are three reactors total, and Gael is fairly certain that each one controls a section of the Carrier's vital systems."

"Fair enough," Blaine answered. "So who has shield-duty?"

"You do." Samuel said, nodding. "And Zeke," he added, "you're going with him."

"What?" The black-armored soldier snapped. "Why the Hell do I have to go?"

"Because I said so," Samuel answered matter-of-factly. When no answer came, he clarified, "we might need serious firepower to take out the reactor itself, just in case there are firewalls or locks that prevent Demon from doing it through a remote terminal. And, even if Demon can take care of it, I want that reactor so far gone that they don't even consider repairing it â€" not for one second."

"Okay," Zeke said, "that explains why Blaine has to go, in case Demon can't trash them through a remote terminal. Remind me again why I have to go."

"You have to go because, when he's dealing with the reactor, someone has to watch and make sure no Brutes sneak in behind his back. Not only that, but it needs to be done fast. I'm trusting you to deal with any Brutes you see on the way quickly and quietly."

"This sucks, Sam." Zeke protested. "I'll do it, but it sucks."

"Noted," Samuel said emotionlessly. "Now go. We'll meet up with you when you've finished with the reactor. Okay?"

"Sure."

At that, Zeke paused for a few moments, probably speaking with Demon and learning where to go, and then both Spartans rushed out through a glowing, blue door on the left side of the room, relative to the shield-door.

"Now," Samuel continued, looking at Stephanie and Jason. "You two will go with Landon and proceed down this side of the ship, clearing anything you see along the way. If you pass hangars, I want the shield-doors destroyed. If you pass armories," he paused, "we really

need weapons, if you find any."

"Understood, Sam," Jason said, "but I should point out that this Assault Carrier is different in structure than any we've seen before. Typically, Assault Carriers have only one enormous hangar, capable of holding an incredible roster of large ships. Clearly," he took a second to motion around the small hangar they were in, "this isn't it. We don't know what else could be different as well."

"Gael can figure out what's different and where things are based on schematics." Samuel answered, undeterred in his goals. "I'll talk to Vic before you leave and give you the locations. We'll worry about the major hangar bay when all this is over. Until then, just focus on what I told you."

"Got it, Goliath," Stephanie said.

"Now, I'm going to go and talk to her. I'll talk to you over the communications-link when I know where the other hangars are. Other than that, Victoria and I will catch up with you later."

"Where are you going?" Stephanie asked.

"We have to take care of the security systems." Samuel said. "Most Covenant ships have remote terminals all over the place. We'll find one that can access certain parts of the ship, and then we'll let Gael do the rest."

"And then you're meeting us?" Jason asked, clarifying.

"Yes," he answered, "and then we're meeting you."

"Works for me," Jason said. He looked at Stephanie. "You ready?"

The female Spartan laughed loudly. "Please," she said, holding up a pair of Brute Maulers, "I feel like we haven't killed anything in years."

Samuel nodded. "Go on, then," he said. "Get your stuff and wait out there for Landon." He pointed to a door at the right-hand side of the room. "When he comes in here and that shield-door goes down, the in-room atmosphere goes too."

"Got it," Stephanie said. Jason led her to one end of the room and through the sliding Covenant doors.

\_Okay,\_ Samuel thought, turning to the door Victoria had gone through, \_now to get Victoria and get this show on the road.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"How far do we have to go?" Blaine asked calmly. The two Spartans had only been running down the Covenant-style corridors of the Assault Carrier for a few minutes, but he was already getting anxious.<p>

"As usual," Zeke said bitterly, "our luck puts the room we're looking for as far away from us as possible, without having the good fortune of bringing us anywhere near the Control Room." He sighed. "In other words, we're heading toward the back of the ship and, at this pace,

give it about three more minutes."

Blaine rolled his eyes. What were the odds that they would keep up this pace and not see a single Brute on the way to the reactor?

\_Slim to none,\_ he thought. Zeke rounded a corner in front of him and stopped. Blaine ran forward and looked around the wall as well. \_And, as usual, slim is out of town.\_

The four Brutes that were waiting for them, in all fairness, were barely armed " at least, for an attack by a pair of Spartans. One, the Captain, had a Brute Shot. The others only had Spikers.

"Waste of my time," Zeke growled, running forward straight into the middle of them. Blaine thought about drawing his hammer, but realized almost instantly that there was no need. In approximately three seconds, the four Brutes were lying on the ground, bleeding to death"quietly, no less.

"Not bad," Blaine said.

"Let's go." The other Spartan snapped. "I just got here and I'm already anxious to get out." With that, he took off running down the halls once more.

"Here we go again," Blaine snarled, taking off on a dead sprint to try and keep up with the smaller, faster Spartan. The Rocket Launcher on his back wasn't helping his pace, either. He muttered under his breath, "who the Hell puts a fusion reactor in the very back of a damned spaceship?"

This Assault Carrier really was something completely different.

\* \* \*

><p>"So this is what we're up against?" Landon asked. Jason, Stephanie, and himself were on the third floor of another of the Covenant ship's minor launch bays, looking down on a trio of parked Banshees, eleven Brutes of varying ranks, and better than two-dozen Grunts and Jackals. "Bad luck for the little guys."<p>

"No kidding." Jason said. He glanced between the two other Spartans. "So, how do you guys wanna do this? Don't forget, we could have more contacts on the floor below us."

"I say we jump." Stephanie answered without a second's hesitation. "We take out the floor below us quietly, then wreak some real havoc on the bottom floor." She calmly flashed the grips of the two Maulers attached to her armor.

Jason turned to Landon. "What do you think?"

"Doesn't matter to me," he said. "I picked up a Carbine when we pulled in. Plus," he hefted the Flamethrower that he'd brought with him up to his waist, "I've got this bad boy if things get messy."

Jason shook his head. "You mean if you want things to get messy."

Landon shrugged. "That too."

"Come on, guys," Stephanie said. "Whatever we're gonna do, we need to do it and be done with it; there's still one more working hangar."

"She's right." Landon said, loading the Carbine. "Let's get to it. If you two want close-range, I'll play sniper for you."

Jason nodded. "Sounds good," he said, re-loading the Brute Shot he'd taken from a Captain in the previous hangar. "Don't miss."

"Please," Landon laughed, "I have no intentions of missing their big ugly heads."

"Alright," Jason said, glancing down. He turned to Stephanie, nodded, and prepared to jump down-

But she put her arm out in front of him, stopping the Spartan in his tracks. "Be a gentleman," she said, "ladies first." A second later, she jumped.

"You show us a lady first," Landon mused, "and then, maybe we'll show you gentlemen!"

Jason grinned, readied the Brute Shot, and stepped off the third level, turning around and gripping the edge as he did so, allowing him to hang only a few feet from the second floor, directly below him.

A Brute was running by, presumably to get to Stephanie, when it suddenly found itself face-down on the floor, pinned by Jason's giant, biomechanical legs. Before the alien could even consider letting out any kind of alert, the Spartan had planted the bayonet of the Brute Shot deep into its skull.

"Jason!" Stephanie yelled, "watch yourself!"

He turned around to see a trio of Brute Minors and four Grunts all running in his direction. Unfortunately, when they saw what he was holding, the Covenant soldiers stopped cold.

"Oh no!" Jason sighed as each and every one primed a grenade. As expected, there were four glowing blue bombs, and a trio of spiked explosives.

"Catch, Demon!" One of the Grunts shouted as it reared back to throw the grenade.

But its arm never made it back above the alien's head, as a thin, green beam suddenly came from somewhere above and behind Jason, pegging the creature right between its eyes and causing it to drop to the ground, dead.

"I told you I could aim!" Landon's voice echoed in his helmet. In seconds, three more shots were fired, and the Grunts were all lying dead on the ground, primed grenades still in-hand.

The Brutes never had a chance. Only one of them managed to drop its

grenade and run in time to escape the series of explosions, and that one was unfortunate enough to run straight for Jason and his Brute Shot.

"Hey, freak!" He said, but the Brute barely had time to register what was going on before it was blasted four times in the chest with the Brute Shot's explosive rounds. As its armor fell to the ground around the creature, it let out a terrible roar and leapt into the air.

Jason didn't even flinch as the creature soared toward him. Even as the howling alien began to come down " coming right for him " Jason only watched, waiting.

Sure enough, another small beam of green energy appeared in the air, hitting the Brute square in the forehead and cutting all the way through to its brain.

Jason sidestepped calmly as the body fell to the floor exactly where he had been, only moments before.

"Nice shot," he said coolly. "I was starting to wonder if you were just gonna leave me there."

"Thought about it," Landon joked. "If you were Zeke, I would have."

"Point taken," Jason said, grinning. He turned around, expecting to find some horde of overwhelming proportions ready to wage nine kinds of war.

Instead, he saw Stephanie tearing into the skull of an un-armored Brute with the blade on the end of one of her Maulers, and bodies all around her. There were dozens of Brutes, Grunts, Jackals, and even a few Drones that Jason hadn't even noticed.

"Damn!" He shouted. "Save a few for me!"

"I did." Stephanie answered. She turned to face him, and then pointed to the bottom floor.

Jason crept over to the edge and looked down.

"Damn it!" he yelled. At the bottom, a trio of cowering, red-armored Grunts was staring up at him. That was all. No Brutes. No snipers. No nothing. Just Grunts. "How could you do that to me?" He asked.

The female Spartan only shrugged. "You snooze, you lose."

\* \* \*

><p>The Vice Admiral cursed under his breath. This was nothing like how the plan was supposed to turn out. Granted, it was nothing short of a miracle that the <em>Leviathan</em> had bailed them out of what was absolute certain death, but things were still not at all well.

For one thing, if the Prophet, or whoever else was managing the Assault Carrier managed to grow the courage to recharge the shield-systems, he was only partially accepting to the idea that the

Leviathan alone could handle the Covenant ship. And, if it couldn't, the Atonement certainly wasn't going to be of any help; not in its current state.

In addition to that, Zulu Company had somehow successfully boarded the Capitol Ship but, after that, no one knew anything about what happened. Hell, even Agnes knew only what he had been told: that the Spartans had somehow been given the wrong the ship, one without additional armaments and, beyond that, one that did not live up to their expectationsâ€|

Or the Vice Admiral's, for that matter.

He would talk to someone about that, if they made it out alive. And, even if they didn't, someone would catch Hell for it. There was no reason â€" not one â€" that seven soldiers willing to go into the depths of Hell, alone no less, couldn't get a half-way-decent ship.

"Vice Admiral," Delilah said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yes, Delilah?" he answered.

"Commander Black for you, sir," she said.

Agnes sighed. "Patch him through," he said reluctantly.

A few seconds later, "Vice Admiral," the Commander said, "we have a serious problem."

"Thank you for that startling revelation, Commander." Agnes said bitterly. "What is the problem you're referring to?"

"Sir," Black answered, his tone riddled with disdain, "I believe that we have a rogue Longsword pilot on our hands." He paused. "I would suggest checking your flight logs, seeing if you've had any unauthorized dockings or launches."

Agnes smiled slightly, thinking of a particular unauthorized launch by the Spartan, Landon. "I'll check." He said. "Is that all?"

"It is."

"Good." And he cut the connection.

And then, as if she had been waiting on him to cut the call, Delilah said, "sir, I might have something for you."

"What is it, Delilah?"

"One of our armories," she said, her tone dry, "well, you should see the monitor." With that, she changed one of the monitors, and Agnes cursed again.

"What happened?" He asked, thrusting his hands out and pointing. "What the Hell happened?"

"I don't know, sir." The AI answered. "It happened after we were hit. The cameras were out. Most still are."



"Lock the launch bays." Agnes said. "Find whoever took them." He looked again at the image of the armory. It had been stripped almost completely clean. There were at least three-dozen guns missing, plus countless grenades and boxes of ammo.

If Agnes hadn't known better, he'd have sworn that only a Spartan could possibly have carried so much.

\* \* \*

><p>"It's no use, Sam." Victoria said, pulling the neuro-chip that held Gael from another Covenant terminal. "She can't get in. We'll just have to open the doors ourselves."<p>

Samuel shook his head. "Alright," he answered. "we need to get moving, then. The others are probably getting closer to the Prophet, and we've made no progress at all."

"Four doors down," Gael said into the female Spartan's helmet, "there's a hallway that will curve around and take you the hangar that Jason, Stephanie, and Landon just departed from."

"Thanks," Victoria said. Then she relayed the info to Samuel, "Gael says to take that door down there." She pointed to it calmly, then turned back to Samuel. "It'll take us-"

BOOM!

Something hit her right between the shoulder blades and exploded, denting her shields and rattling her vision. She turned around, activating her Energy Sword just as another cloaked Brute fired, not three feet away.

"Victoria!"

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel went from a calm, collected leader, to a frenzied killing-machine in two-seconds-flat. The first Brute that had fired had found a Spike Grenade embedded right between its ugly eyes. The second, well, he was the unlucky one.<p>

The alien managed to get three rounds off, each one hitting Vic directly in the chest and face, before Sam had closed the gap and grabbed the creature by its neck.

"Demon!" it gasped, thrusting at him with the bayonet at the end of the Brute Shot. Samuel gripped the blade with his hand, letting the shields take the brunt of the damage.

"Bad move." He growled. He snapped the Brute's neck and spun around, throwing the alien as hard as he could down the hallway. The ugly creature hit the ground and skidded, again and again until-

Something got in the way.

"What the-"

Samuel never got to finish that sentence, as two thick, green beams

of plasma soared through the hallway, barely missing him as he ducked down to check on Victoria.

"Vic," he whispered, "you okay? Vic?"

She moaned slightly, trying to move.

It was at that moment that Samuel realized the trouble they were in. He turned on the infrared sensors on his visor, and saw a pair of Hunters moving down the hallway toward them, staggered, because they couldn't fit side-by-side.

He turned to run, but stopped cold.

Two more were on his opposite side. They were cloaked as well.

Samuel looked at Victoria again. She was still down. The biofoam hadn't taken effect yet. As the Hunters charged their cannons and fired again, he grabbed the small object that was magnetically attached to the female Spartan's armor and dropped it on the floor.

Instantly, a glowing yellow sphere surrounded the two Spartans, temporarily shielding them from the incoming assaults. But Samuel knew—he knew in the back of his mind that it wouldn't last long.

\_Twenty seconds,\_ he thought, looking around. He had two Shotguns, a pair of Frag Grenades, one Spike Grenade, and a Battle Rifle on him; nothing he could use to fight a Hunter.

Or four, for that matter.

"Guys," he said into his link, "we need assistance, now." He paused. "Bring heavy weapons. And hurry."

\* \* \*

><p>"Would you hurry up?" Zeke asked bitterly. He and Blaine were in a small room that overlooked a huge, cavernous chamber. Inside that chamber, the reactor hovered, a blinding, yellow-white light. The small room, however, housed a thousand different computers, loaded with more Covenant knowledge than some of their planets no doubt held.<p>

And Blaine was tearing them apart.

"We don't even know if this will work." Zeke said. "Demon says that he's destroyed all routes to the shield-systems from this reactor, but your job is to destroy the reactor—not the computers."

Blaine stopped, throwing a hunk of wires and metal to the ground. "Do you see the reactor?" He asked, pointing out the viewing-window. "It's hovering God-knows-how-many feet in the air. I can't reach that. This is the best I can do."

"Well, you need to hurry up an—"

Blaine ripped the core right out of a large system in the corner, and

the reactor began to glow more brightly. Then, seconds later, it started to dim.

"Oh yeah," he said, pointing. "That's what I'm talking about."

The reactor, within a minute, had completely vanished, and the cavernous chamber was pitch-dark.

"They shut it down." Zeke said, realizing. "There's no way ripping out computer cords would do it so cleanly. They knew it was going, so they shut it down." He paused, and another realization came to mind. "They don't need the shields." He said. "They have something else planned."

With that, he sprinted back into the hallway they had just come from, Blaine right behind him.

"Wait up!" The white-armored soldier shouted. "We need to stick--"

"Guys," a voice echoed in their helmets. It was Samuel. "We need assistance, now. Bring heavy weapons." He paused. "And hurry."

"Let's go," Blaine said, instantly changing directions. "They're that way!" He pointed to a glowing green door.

Every ounce of instinct in his body told Ezekiel to run through the hallway, but he had to get to Sam. He had to get to Vic. There wasn't time.

The door opened to his left and he ran inside. However, the two Spartans only got about four steps before the door shut behind them, locked and drenched in red light. Zeke skidded to a halt.

"Damn it," Blaine said.

\_Stupid fool!\_ Zeke cursed himself. \_I knew I smelled a trap.\_

He looked down the hallway. There were three doors on each side, all bathed in red light, and then, more than thirty meters ahead, the path split at a four-way-cross.

And, out of that cross, came a half-dozen Brute Chieftains.

"Of course," Zeke growled, looking at the gold-armored Brutes. "I hate Fuel Rod Guns." Each one of them had one of the shoulder-held, explosive-shooting weapons.

"Here we go again," Blaine snapped from behind him, pulling up his hammer.

Zeke got the Energy Sword from his waist and had it activated in front of him in a fraction of a second.

"Alright," Blaine said, "I think we can take 'em if--"

Zeke heard the door behind them slide open, and there were a dozen green explosions as another four Chieftains unloaded on the two Spartans from behind. Ezekiel was knocked forward and slid across the

floor until he caught himself.

"Damned alien bast-" He was only half-way standing when the red door to his right opened, and a Brute Chieftain with a Gravity Hammer smacked him down the hall, sending him skidding across the ground until he was stopped by another Chieftain with a hammer, looking down at him.

"Now, Demon," the Brute growled, "you die." He lifted the hammer above his head.

"Oh, Hell," Zeke said, trying hard to move, but getting nowhere. There was no way. He couldn't even feel his legs, much less do anything with them. He prepared himself for the impact, braced himself as the Brute swung down and-

BOOM!

The hammer hit something, and the wave of energy knocked Ezekiel face-down into the floor, but it never touched him. It took all he had to turn his head and look up.

Blaine was crouched over him, on his knees with his hands above his head, the hammer's heavy end resting in them. He was cringingâ€|shaking. Suddenly, his arms drooped to his sides, limp.

"Bla-Blaine," Zeke managed, "your arms-"

"Busted," he growled, and Ezekiel could tell that he was grinding his teeth.

Suddenly, Zeke found himself being lifted by his helmet, until he was staring another Brute Chieftain in the face. "The Hierarch has plans for you two." The gold-armored alien said, glancing menacingly to the Brute that had tried to kill him only a few moments earlier. A second later, he smacked the Spartan's head into the wall, and Ezekiel blacked out.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hurry up!" Jason shouted, running ahead of both Landon and Stephanie, sprinting toward the far end of the hangar with all he had in him. "They need our help now!"<p>

"We're going as fast as we can!" Landon yelled back.

Jason was about to respond when something caught his eye. It was on the ceiling, in the shadows. It looked almost like a limb, but was easily the size of one of the Spartans. In a second, it had vanished through a large vent, or a special kind of door, Jason couldn't tell which.

"What the Hell are you looking at?" Stephanie shouted, sprinting past him. Landon was right behind her.

"Uh," Jason started, "I'mâ€|I'm not sure."

"Come on!" She shouted. "Remember? Sam? Vic?"

"Yeah," he shook his head. Whatever he sawâ€¦it didn't matter; at least, not yet. He sprinted after the other two Spartans and, after a few seconds, overtook them, leading the way once more.

As he led the team through a green-lit door, the radar on his HUD showed two "friendly" blipsâ€¦

And better than a dozen large, red dots.

"We've got company." He said, checking the Brute Shot. "Load the Maulers and get that Flamethrower ready," he paused, then added sarcastically, "this ought to be a real blast."

"Sam," Stephanie said, broadcasting her voice as they dashed down the last hallway, ending with a door that separated them from their teammates. "If you can hear us: three Spartans, coming in-"

"And comin' in hot!" Landon shouted, raising the Flamethrower.

\_Here we go,\_ Jason thought as the last Covenant door opened before him. Behind it was a large, square room with only two pillars in the center for any kind of cover and a single door on each wall. Samuel was holding Victoria, and was taking cover behind one of the pillars, standing on the opposite side from the incoming Spartans.

But that was all.

"Where are the Covies, Sam?" Landon shouted.

"They're cloak-"

CRACK!

Before Samuel could even finish, a Hunter's shielded limb appeared out of thin air as it crashed into Jason's stomach, knocking him straight back into Stephanie behind him. Even as he shook his head and started to stand, Jason watched as Landon dashed at the veritable tank.

"You like fire, freak?" He shouted, then absolutely unloaded on the creature, flames pouring from the front of his weapon like it was the faucet from Hell.

Now, while Hunters were a force to be reckoned with, they were not the most agile of the Covenant species. And, like most other creatures â€" human and alien alike â€" their bodies don't have a positive response to being cooked at exceedingly high temperatures.

This particular Hunter's response was to swing its giant limb once more in an attempt to crush Landon where he stood. However, Landon simply jumped back and kept spraying. He let fire pour from the nozzle for several more seconds, until it finally overheated.

And, by that time, the Hunter had collapsed onto the ground, each individual worm writhing and burning in agony.

"You see that?" Landon asked, laughing and pointing. "I love this thing!"

No sooner had he said it that Jason was pushed aside as Stephanie came running past him, straight for Landon. Jason turned his visor to the infrared setting, and he immediately understood.

Another of the cloaked Hunters was running up behind Landon, getting ready to swing its great arm up and send him soaring, and he didn't have the slightest idea. Stephanie practically threw him out of the way as she ran by and braced her hands against the creature's limb, using all of her biomechanical muscle to hold it at bay.

But Jason suddenly noticed the true problem. In the room that five members of Zulu Company had found themselves in, there were still two more of the giant aliens. And, as the Hunters deactivated their cloaking technology, he realized that, of the five of them, only Landon had anything that even resembled a heavy weapon.

"Sam," Jason said, "what do we do now?"

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel shook his head. "Don't know!" he shouted as one of the Hunters took aim at him and Victoria. It leveled its shoulder-mounted cannon and, after a brief charge, opened fire.<p>

The brown-armored Spartan, without the time to fully dodge the attack and with an unconscious Victoria still in his arms, did the only thing he could think of: he turned a half-circle and took it, directly in the back. The searing plasma radiated around his armor as it quickly melted through his shields. Then, it started to burn the armor on his back and-

It stopped. The charge on the Hunter's weapon had depleted.

"Thank God," Samuel whispered, feeling the burning tinge of plasma on his back. He turned around, preparing for another shot from the alien, but got another surprise.

Instead of readying its weapon, the Hunter simply charged forward, ready to crush both Spartans into the very pillar that Samuel was trying to use as cover.

"I'm sorry, Vic," he said, putting her quickly on the floor. A second later, he threw himself forward as hard as he could, directly into the oncoming soldier. The force was enough to knock the Hunter over, and they rolled along the floor, each one struggling and working not to be the one pinned beneath the other.

Somehow, the Hunter won out, and found itself on top of Samuel, pinning him to the floor, not with its shielded limb, but with its entire body. Its Assault Cannon turned toward him, pointing directly at his head as it began to glow and radiate green energy-

BANG!

The orange blood of the Lekgolo sprayed up into the air, coming back down on Samuel's visor as the Hunter roared in agony. He grinned and fired again.

BANG!

His other Shotgun tore whatever Lekgolo remained in the Hunter's abdomen straight out of its armor, ripping them to shreds and causing the giant soldier to roll over, howling. Samuel took his chance. He sat up and pumped both Shotguns between his arms and his sides.

BANG!

Both guns fired simultaneously, blasting the Hunter's 'face' into tiny, jiggling, orange-colored fragments.

Samuel went to pump the Shotguns again, but realized his worst mistake yet: they were both empty. He'd used all he had.

And, as if on cue, the fourth Hunter in the room roared and stared him down from in front of the pillar he'd been hiding behind only moments before. He looked closely behind and around the giant alien, but Victoria was nowhere to be found.

The Hunter roared loudly and lowered its shield-arm, preparing to charge. It took one step, however, before its entire back side suddenly lit up with burning flames.

In a fraction of a second, Victoria had appeared from behind the alien and leapt onto its shoulder, holding it around its 'neck' with one arm and slashing gruesome cuts down its back with the other. Finally, it began to stumble, and then it started to fall backwards.

Victoria stopped slashing and got ready to jump, but the Hunter, before it fell, pressed its shielded arm hard against its chest and face, pinning the female Spartan's arm there and leaving her hanging helplessly behind it as it continued to stumble.

Samuel stood up and took off, but knew he wouldn't make it in time. The Hunter collapsed, falling straight back-

And stopped, its back and head still four feet in the air.

"These guys are heavy!" Stephanie shouted, pushing the alien up and forward so that its arm would slide away, allowing Victoria to escape. When she had, Stephanie dropped the body to the floor.

"I owe you one." Victoria said.

"No," Stephanie said, shaking her head. "We're even."

"Um," Landon shouted rather impatiently, "I hate to interrupt this wonderful moment, but we're not quite done yet!" Samuel turned to see him pointing at the door opposite the one Samuel and Victoria had entered through.

Inside it, at least four more Hunters were crouched, slowing starting to file into the room.

"I'm out of ammo!" Jason shouted immediately. "The Brute Shot's officially done for the day."

"I've just got Maulers." Stephanie said, her voice frantic. "What do we do?" She turned to Samuel.

Sam looked to Stephanie, then to Vic, then to Landon, and finally to Jason. It was at that moment that realized it: he had no idea. There was nothing they could do. They needed firepower that they didn't have.

BOOM!

A series of more than fourteen explosions from the doorway tore him away from his thoughts. Each of them was bright and green, like a Fuel Rod, but they were in rapid succession, hitting two at a time. In seconds, the Hunters fell, still in single-file.

Samuel raised his fists. His radar showed a single white dot. Not friendly. Not enemy. He didn't know what to expect.

But he certainly didn't expect what he got.

From the shadows of the room beyond, stepping on the bodies of the fallen Hunters that he'd killed as if they were nothing but cannon fodder, stepped a giant individual, more than eleven-feet tall and clad in dark green MJOLNIR armor that looked somewhat different than the sets the other Spartans were wearing. His visor was a deep shade of red, and he had a Shotgun strapped to one leg and a Battle Rifle on the other. There was a strange looking rifle attached to his back.

Victoria was the first to react.

"I can't believe it." She said. "You can'tâ€|there's no way."

The giant Spartan turned to her, nodded, and turned back to Samuel. "It's been a long time." He said, his voice much lower and darker than the last time Sam had heard it.

"Yes it has." He answered. "We thought you were dead." At that, he added cautiously, "Magnus."

The green-armored soldier laughed. "So did I, for a little while. I can tell you: Hell would've been an improvement over a few of the things I've seen." He paused. "But enough about me; I come bearing gifts." He said jokingly.

With that, he stepped back into the dimly lit room he'd come from and vanished as the doors closed behind him. Ten seconds later, they opened again, and he emerged with two large crates, each one stuffed full of weapons, grenades, and equipment.

"There's a Sniper Rifle and a Gravity Hammer in here too." He said. "I figured that Zeke and Blaine would've joined you by now." He hesitated. "I waited as long as I could for them to show upâ€|wanted to see if you could handle them without me."

"Wait!" Landon said. "You waited? You waited for them to-"

"Enough," Samuel said, nodding. He turned to Magnus. "Something's very wrong." He said. "I know those two: they'd have been here by now."

\* \* \*



><p>Ezekiel woke up in a small storage room with only a few computer terminals and a single Brute Minor to keep him company. His hands were bound high above his head by an Energy Tether, and his sword was missing. Other than that, and an excruciating headache, he was fine.<p>

"Glad to see you're awake, Demon." The Brute said. "The Hierarch will be here shortly. He has someâ€|\" The Brute hesitated, "questions for you."

"Tell him I said to go to Hell." Zeke said coldly. "In the meantime, you mind letting me down from here? My wrists are asleep."

Before the Brute could answer, the door opened. From the hallway, two Brute Chieftains, one of each color, and a Prophet in a hovering throne came inside.

Instantly, the three Brutes bowed low. The Prophet looked to Zeke, as if expecting the same, despite his current state.

"I'd bow," Zeke snapped, "but I'm a little tied up at the moment. Maybe, if you let me down, we can work something ou-"

"Silence." The Prophet interrupted. "Do you know who I am, Demon?"

"No." Zeke said, shrugging as best he could. "Don't care."

"I am the High Prophet of Mercy!" He said triumphantly. Ezekiel began to laugh.

"Oh, come on!" He said. "I know you guys all look the same to me but, last I checked, Mercy was dead and gone." The Spartan shook his head. "Nice try."

"You fool." The Prophet said. "It's true: I was dying and left for dead on the edge of High Charity when the parasite attacked. Another Demon, like you, pulled a parasite from my body and destroyed it. I quickly faded away." He paused, as if for dramatic effect. "But, thankfully, I was found by a group of loyal soldiers, who took me on their dropship back to this Assault Carrier where, in time, I was restored in my health!"

Zeke clapped quietly, his hands still above his head. "Great story," he said sarcastically, "now, tell me, why exactly do I care?"

The Prophet ignored him, continuing on. "If you tell me what I want to know and do as I ask, I will let you leave here, Demon." Mercy said. "Now, I ask you: how many of you are there?"

"How many of me?" Zeke asked innocently. "Well, there's only one of me. I mean, surely there's not another--"

"Do not trifle with me, human." Mercy said, and the two Chieftains stepped forward. "How many Demons are on my ship?"

"Six." Zeke said instantly. "Next question."

The Prophet nodded, seemingly satisfied. Zeke grinned. "Who leads

you, Demon? Which Demon leads the group?"

"I do." Ezekiel answered immediately. "I lead the group. They're my soldiers. And they know better than to barter for me, so you might as well give it a rest already."

The Prophet's face twisted, becoming more irritated. "You try my patience, Demon." He growled. "If you wish to leave here, you will answer my question truthfully."

"Umâ€|" Zeke said, cocking his head back and forth. "How aboutâ€|no." He shook his head, "no, I don't think so."

Mercy's throne spun around, facing the door. "Let's give him some time." He said, apparently to the Brutes. "Then we'll see if he wants to talk."

With that, all but the Brute Minor and the hammer-wielding Chieftain left the room. The lower-ranking soldier lifted its arms and curled its hands into fists.

"Oh, great," Zeke growled. Then he smiled, "go ahead. Let's see what you've got, chimpy. But I tell you right now: you better know how to throw a punch."

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine awoke in a haze. He was lying flat on the floor in the center of a small room, no more than double the size of a minor armory on the Atonement. Inside, two Brute Majors were staring him down. The only thing decorating the empty room was a computer terminal behind one of the Brutes.<p>

The white-armored Spartan reacted instantly, raising his arms and-

His arms didn't move.

He tried again, but nothing happened. They wouldn't respond at all. In the corner of his HUD, the words '\*\*Critical Failure\*\*' were lit up in bright red.

He got ready to say something, but the Covenant-style door into the room suddenly slid open.

"Hello, Demon." A voice said, eerily calm. Before the Spartan could even breathe, a Covenant Prophet came in, hovering on one of the thrones they were ubiquitously seen with.

A gold-armored Chieftain walked in behind him, looking at Blaine menacingly.

"A Prophet," Blaine said coldly, "I'm thrilled."

"I am the High Prophet of Mercy." The alien said proudly. When Blaine cocked his head, it added, "contrary to what you have been told, Demon, I did survive the attack on High Charity. And now, I've come, to finish-"

"Shut the Hell up." Blaine interrupted. "I don't give a damn what you

came for. If the Atonement doesn't hear from me or the others in the next four minutes," he lied, "they'll blow you straight to Hell."

"What?" The Prophet asked, tapping its fingers on the throne's controls. Seconds later, the chair floated closer, and Blaine could hear the Vice Admiral's voice in the background.

"Oh," Blaine said, looking at the Prophet, "I don't think so. I'd flip you off if my arms were working. For now, I'll settle for this: burn in Hell."

"You will speak, Demon!" Mercy growled. "And you will tell the rest of your wretched kind to wait, as you have everything under control."

Blaine cocked his head. "Oh, alright," he said, inching toward the Prophet and the microphone. "Vice Admiral," he said, "can you hear me?"

"Blaine?" Agnes asked.

"That's right." He said. Quickly, he added, "things took a bit of a turn. I'm kind of a POW." He said the word as 'pow' rather than spelling it out, but was deathly calm as he did so.

Mercy's features changed as the alien leaned back, puzzled by the statement. As Blaine had expected, the Prophet hadn't caught the acronym.

Agnes got the hint, however, and remained calm as well. "What can we do?" He asked.

"Wait an hour." Blaine said coolly. "Then open fire."

The responses were two-fold and immediate. First, the link was terminated and the Prophet began shouting. Second, the Brute Chieftain lifted Blaine by his shoulders and threw him back onto the floor.

"You humans are all the same!" Mercy snarled. "You know nothing of the Great Journey. You know nothing of the gods. You are all abominations to be annihilated!"

"Whatever," Blaine said emotionlessly. He looked at the clock on his HUD. "You've got about an hour, and then you are annihilated." He smiled. "It must really bite not to have your shield-systems working."

The Chieftain reared back and kicked him hard in the chest. Blaine smiled against the pain. "I'm cybernetic. I can't feel anything there," he said, lying through his teeth, "you stupid, ugly bastard."

Again, the Brute pulled its leg back, but Blaine was faster this time. He lied down on his back and thrust himself up and forward, extending his legs at the last second and kicking the Chieftain hard in the chest. The shot wasn't enough to truly harm the creature, but it did stumble backwards and hit the computer terminal hard enough to cause sparks to shoot from the machine.

"You fool!" The Prophet snapped, glaring at the Brute. "That's a vital security terminal. Get one of the Huragok in here and get it fixed, right now!"

At the Prophet's command, the Chieftain waved its hand, and the two Brute Majors left the room.

"And you," Mercy said, turning to Blaine, "I'll ask you the same thing I asked the other: who leads you? Who do you report to, Demon?"

"What?" Blaine asked, suddenly laughing. "You asked Zeke?" He laughed even louder. "Let me guess: he told you that he was in charge and that we all report to him."

Mercy only stared back.

"Don't listen to him." Blaine said with a snicker. "He's a dumbass." He shook his head. "It's me." The Spartan said. "I'm the one in charge. I call the shots."

The Prophet's calm exterior died away instantly. "I have had enough of your games, Demon!" Mercy growled. "I am an instrument of the gods! Your death is their will! I will--"

"Please. Spare me the monologue." Blaine snarled. "You'll do nothing." He rolled his eyes. "And neither will your so-called gods."

Mercy looked as if he would explode again, but suddenly regained his composure. He turned to the Chieftain. "Make sure the Huragok fixes this terminal." He said. "After that, leave and watch the other Demon. Lock the door behind you."

"Should I leave someone to watch him, Hierarch?"

The Prophet shook his head. "Why bother?" He asked, pointing to Blaine's arms. "He's no threat to anyone. He can't even unlock the doors without help. Just do as I tell you."

"In that case, can I just kill him?" The Brute asked hopefully.

"No." Mercy answered threateningly. "I have plans for him. I will not say it again: just do as I say."

"Yes, Hierarch," the ape-like alien answered, lowering its head.

And, with that, the Prophet left the room, the Chieftain close behind.

"Well," Blaine said lowly, "looks like things just got more interesting around here."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Again, a little late, but plenty long this time, and I've got the next one in the works. Now, for my good

news and bad news.<strong>

**\*\*The bad news is this: my girlfriend is leaving for Japan on Thursday morning (tomorrow). Now, you might be asking yourself, "why do I care?" Well, the reason is this: while I will miss her greatly, and the fact that she is leaving is bad news for me, it is good news for all of you (meaning anyone who likes this story), because I will have very little (if anything) to do, other than type. I will be typing pretty much just to pass the time for the next three weeks. So, that being said, I intend on finishing this segment and beginning the next one very, very soon. Stay tuned everyone! Hope to hear from you all!\*\***

**\*\*P.S. - Anyone who was asking him/herself, "why do I care?" should take note of this: said girlfriend is the person who persuaded me (and you have no idea how stubborn an individual I am...) to post this story in the first place. No girl ...no Zulu Company. lol. So yeah, just a side note. :)\*\***

**\*\*Anyways, see you all later, hope this chapter has you waiting to find out what happens. Oh, and yes, you can all say it: I finally brought him back. ;) Go ahead; you know you want to. Just get it out. lol.\*\***

**\*\*P.S.S. - Anyone wanna try and tell me the meaning behind this dialogue, or where it came from?\*\***

**\*\*Victoria: "I owe you one."  
>Stephanie: "We're even."<strong>**

**\*\*Just curious to see who remembers. See you all later!\*\***

## 46. Chapter 45: Tricks

**\*\*Author's Notes: BAH! First off, anyone who hates me for lying about the timespan...I do apologize. However, apparently, my computer decided that a security program was needed (despite the fact that I wasn't aware I had an active one...though I am now), and it went on a dead run through my computer, deleting (amongst other things I'm not happy about) my most recent chapters (yes, this one and next), some of my MSN records (minor, but a nuisance nonetheless...thankfully many were backed up), and - here's my favorite - my Java program. You know, that one that lets you do ANYTHING on FanFiction? Yeah.\*\***

**\*\*So, that was all very, very amusing to deal with. And, when I say "amusing," I mean "if I have to put up with that again, I will wing my computer straight out my freakin' window." So, without any more wait, here is the next chapter (reviews first), and then I will do the best I can to REDO the next one as soon as possible. Unfortunately for me, my lovely GF does not return for another week. That being said, I will do all I can to finish this segment up (for the SECOND TIME). I apologize for the inconvenience and the fact that my computer decided to make me a liar.\*\***

**\*\*Now, REVIEWS: (Note: most of these, minus a few, will be quick, short, and address questions as such, except for one or two, to save on time and to get me started on doing the next chapter ASAP. Thank you in advance for your understanding)\*\***

**\*\*killerman83ca:** First off, no apologies are required for long reviews. I love reading them, really. Also, thank you for the mistake pointed out (it has been fixed). As for Blaine and Zeke...well, you're about to find out. Thanks for the review, and enjoy!\*\*

**\*\*0756:** Hey! Long time no see! lol. Glad you're still with me. I'm glad you enjoyed the space segment for the most part...honestly, the "light" detail parts are usually the parts where I tried, but was afraid to put too much into it for fear of making some kind of massive, critical error, either in regards to Halo canon or, worse, physics, lol. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Yeah, he's back, lol. And yes, the reference was from training somewhere. I'll tell everyone where it was at the end of the Reviews, if anyone is interested. Also, cloaked Hunters, while I've never read anything about them, did exist thanks to a certain skull in H2, so that's where I got the idea from. So, my thinking had help, lol. ;) Thanks for the review!\*\*

**\*\*Lord Zander:** Hi! Thanks for the compliments, and I will make sure my girlfriend gets hers. As far as the Hunters go...well, as I told Taylor114, I got the idea from H2 and the Assassin skull that made all the enemies invisible. Not quite canon, but I'll survive. I already brought Mercy back, lol. Thanks again!\*\*

**\*\*armoured-blade:** Hey! Good call, lol! And I'll respond to your other review separately...since it's on another page, lol\*\*

**\*\*superultramario:** Hey, thanks for reviewing!  
>(1) lol, so am I, but she comes back soon...not soon enough, but soon.<br>(2) Magnus' alterations will become apparent over time...I don't want to uncover them all at once. Some you'll see and hear about here.  
>(3) It could mean that...you'll have to wait and see.<strong>

**\*\*Lecter42:** Always thinking and probing! I love your reviews for that! But no, this time it is Mercy, and it is a planned departure from canon. I hope this doesn't put off too many readers, you know? Thanks for the compliments, and I would apologize again for the lack of new chapters...but you can read the top for that...and the bottom...lol. And a dozen places in between, I'm guessing, before I finish.\*\*

**\*\*AosUnderSol:** Hey! Yeah, I think Magnus might become a new favorite for some people, just for raw power. You'll have to wait and see. Some of his alterations will be revealed now, but a few of them, I'm keeping secret for a while. I don't want to reveal everything all at once. But, you'll see his backstory soon (though, as you can understand, there's not a lot of time for chat on-board a Covenant Assault Carrier, lol). Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*r0f1c0p73R:** Hey, it's good to see someone new reviewing. First off, Zeke's character, I can assure you, has no connection with the one in Isolation (though, I will recommend the story to anyone who can stomach a small amount of gore and detailed agony...it really is excellent, and I hope that the next chapter gets up soon, lol). And,

in my defense, I get much better about the bolding if you stick with it, lol.\*\*

\*\*hellhound cerberus: Glad you liked the last few chapters! Don't worry about being busy...I understand entirely. Also, in regards to questions: (1) Magnus went through different (additional) alterations and enhancements and training that will be revealed in pieces, throughout the rest of this story and within his own. He's not "better" than the others, so much as he has a bit more firepower. (2) Yes, they will get fixed...in time. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*Spartan Ophir 06: lol, glad you approve! Sorry it was a bit slow...but, it was hard to reintroduce a character for so long, and that's very much what it was centered around. Also, sorry we haven't gotten to chat at all in the last week or two...I've been on MSN very, very few times, and my internet, I swear, is breaking down further than it is already. Half the time, I can't seem to stay on here more than three minutes before I get booted again. It's really starting to bug me. Thanks for reviewing, man!\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: Yeah, Magnus is back, lol. Finally, I know. And you'll see the same old rivalry, albeit played a little different. You'll be getting specs and such on his armor shortly, but more detail will be given once this segment is over and there's a little downtime (it's hard to stand and talk about armor when there are a thousand Covenant around, lol). And YES, I am very much looking forward to Halo Wars. Can't wait.\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade (again, lol): I'm glad that you've gotten to like most of the characters, and that you, like me, can appreciate the addition of the AIs into the story. For a while, there was little I could really do with them, other than the supporting role, but now I've gotten into the more technical bit of the story, and things get to involve them a bit more. I will take what you said about Jason into consideration. Really, for me, it's like a big balancing act, lol. I have to get everything I want to get done finished in a chapter, and still try to get everyone their bits in where I can. It's a blast, but it's a pain sometimes too. As for Mercy...there might be something from his POV...we'll have to wait and see. In regards to Magnus and the rifle: you'll see in this chapter who else has one. I made sure to address it early on. Thanks for your review, sorry response so short...pressed for time, lol.\*\*

\*\*Samus 117: Thank you very much for the compliment, and I'll make sure she gets her thanks too. Enjoy!\*\*

\*\*vernox: I apologize, with the rush, I forgot all about your proposition. If you would, please email me about the idea, with any details you have and would like to provide. I could use a few new faces (particularly for the next segment), so I will consider it. Thanks for the review!\*\*

\*\*1 way ticket: Hey you! I'm not even sure what to do with your reviews, lol. There are so many...I can't even begin to address them all. So, in regards to most of them, I'll just say that, any questions you have, I'll answer, and anything regarding individual characters, we'll talk about later, lol. So, questions:  
>(1) What happened to Vic is...well, secret. It'll be revealed later, during this story, and some of the next.<br>(2) Magnus...well, read

on. He's coming, lol.

>(3) Cold...sunglasses...I forfeit the argument.<br>(4) Zeke knows nothing of what happened to her...only that he hates ONI spooks, and an excuse to threaten is an excuse to threaten. ;)

>(5) The ONI operatives and their motives...are also secret, and will likely not be known to anyone but me for a long time.

Sorry.<strong>

\*\*Anyway, thank you so much for all the reviews. I hope you're still having fun over there, and maybe I'll catch you online soon?

Regardless, I'll see you in just over a week. :) I'm glad to see you could read this if you had to, lol. ;) Love you, see you soon.\*\*

\*\*iamzultan: Hey! Thanks for the compliments, and I'm glad you liked it. As for your questions:

>(1) You will get to know the differences in pieces (they will not be revealed all at once in this story), and what happened after the Training Ground will be revealed more in his own story, but also a little in this one.<br>(2) Right now! lol.

>Thanks for reviewing, and enjoy!<strong>

\*\*USMC X: Hi, I saved your review for last, because I wanted to make sure I remembered to do it and put as much thought as I could into it, as you did bring up some very important points. First of all, I do apologize if any of my portrayals of soldiers offended you in some way. Honestly, I have never been in the armed forces and, because of that, there are some things that I will never know. Most of the things you noted (save a few) were those types of things.\*\*

\*\*I do a fair share of research for this story, regarding rank and countless other things, but there are some things that I can't find through Google, if you understand what I mean. For instance, the formal dress. I have no idea what kind of pride or emotion is associated with that to a Marine or an Army veteran or any other member of the armed forces. I simply did it from the POV of soldiers who spent their lives suited up in armor that makes them, for lack of a better word, superhuman. To from that, down to an unarmored, slowed-down state...I would think would put them on edge, and they wouldn't particularly enjoy it. That's my best guess, rather than from research, as I wouldn't know where to look for such a topic.\*\*

\*\*In regards to ranking...I avoided that topic when I could, simply because I'm shaky on the grounds and on the individual steps of the model, so to speak. I've looked that up multiple times (have the model of US Navy, Army, and Air Force ranks saved to favorites, in fact), but I still have trouble with it. Therefore, I simply avoid giving Zulu their individual ranks, as it wouldn't make a terrible lot of difference. This isn't because I think that rank would go unnoticed...only that, besides Samuel pulling "rank" on the other Spartans...I can't see any of them even telling their rank to anyone who didn't already know it.\*\*

\*\*As for their names...well, I think I did have most people refer to them simply as "Spartan" or (in the Sangheili case) "Demon," but yes, I have had a select few call them by their names. I thought about what you said, and you're right, that was my flaw. Simply a creature of habit, I suppose.\*\*



**\*\*Finally, the whole scene with the two captured Spartans...well, I wasn't aware of the exact specifications of what a soldier is or is not to say in that situation, but I did have the gist of it. And, while I'll accept that this probably wouldn't change in 500 years, these two soldiers in particular have never been two to follow orders to a 'T.' Had Samuel or Jason or Stephanie been captured...the odds would've been much higher. But these two, as you mentioned, have a "blatant disregard" for most protocol. And, personally, I can't see either of them getting physically abused and having nothing to say about it. I do agree, it would've been a cool scene for them to do nothing but state their name and number, rank and D.O.B., but that didn't seem fitting from either of them to me.\*\***

**\*\*Oh, and in regards to Samuel: he could have tried to bludgeon them, but in truth, all that he got was a small piece of gravity-altering tech on each knuckle. It gives him some extra force to hit with, but nothing that would penetrate a Hunter's shield.\*\***

**\*\*Lastly, I have to tell you, I have a tremendous respect for all armed forces and those who serve this country, and I thank you for the service that you have performed as well. I hope that my inaccuracies do not put you off from this story, as I do enjoy hearing from actual, working soldiers, or those who once were. It means a lot to me (Spartan Ophir can vouch for me on that, I believe). So thank you for your review, your service, and I hope you will continue to read. \*\***

**\*\*WOW. All those reviews out the way, one thing left before this chapter.\*\***

**\*\*The lines, "I owe you one" and "we're even" came from the chapter, "Shot Down," in which Victoria shot Jason to save Stephanie when she didn't fire her own weapon. Thanks to all who humored me by taking a crack at it! Here's the next chapter!\*\***

**\*\*\*\***

**\* \* \***

**<p><strong>Chapter 45:<strong>**

**â€" \*\*Tricks â€" \*\***

**\*\*2200 Hours - February 1, 2553\*\***

**\*\*Aboard the Covenant Assault Carrier - Outside Earth's Orbit\*\***

"Hell yeah!" Landon shouted, now fully-armed with a Shotgun, Rocket Launcher, and a half-dozen grenades. He turned to Samuel. "Oh man," he said, practically shaking, "this is gonna be fun!"

"Landon," Stephanie said, motioning for him to stay still, "calm."

He started to ease a bit. "You're right," he said, "I'm ready. Let's go!"

Samuel just shook his head. The six of them, now armed to teeth, would be more than a match for anything the Covenant could throw at

them now. Stephanie had her Fuel Rod Cannon locked and loaded. Jason had a Brute Shot and a Beam Rifle. Victoria now had a pair of Energy Swords on her thighs and a Battle Rifle on her back. Samuel himself was carrying the typical Shotgun duo and a Spartan Laser for the next Hunter he came across.

"Hey, Magnus," Jason said casually, "I meant to ask: what's with the rifle on your back? Is it Covenant?"

Magnus shook his head. "It's UNSC." He said. "It's a Hard-Sound Rifle, typically used only by ONI for assassinations and covert-ops." He paused. "There are two more, if anyone wants one."

"How well do they work on shielded Covies?" Landon asked.

Magnus let out a short laugh. "They work great," he said. "It's a one-shot-kill if you aim for the head. Shields don't do a damn thing against these things."

"Sign me up!" Landon shouted. "I'll take one."

"Me too," Jason said, "let's see what these things can do."

Magnus reached into the crate beside him and came out with two of the weapons, identical to the one on his back. From what Samuel could see, they were almost completely smooth, and appeared to be melded perfectly.

"Let's get going." Samuel said. He was about to continue when he was interrupted by a voice in his helmet, over the intercom.

"Spartans," a male voice said, "Spartans, can you hear me? This is the Vice Admiral."

"We can hear you, sir." Samuel said. "What is it?"

"I just talked with one of your teammates a few minutes ago." He said. Samuel was suddenly puzzled. "It was Blaine."

"You talked to Blaine?" He asked. "Where is he?"

"He's been captured." Agnes said. "The Prophet is holding him somewhere on the ship, from what I gathered." He paused, then added, "he gave us instructions to wait one hour, and then open fire on the Assault Carrier. Do you confirm?"

Samuel pondered it only for a second. "Negative," he said. "Wait an hour. Then, if you don't hear from one of us, open fire."

"Understood," Agnes said. "And the other Spartan?"

"He'll be fine." Samuel said. "Just let me worry about him. If a single ship of any kind comes out of the hangar before we can destroy it, open fire immediately. We'll do the best we can on this end."

"I know you will." The Vice Admiral said. "Godspeed, Zulu."

"And you, sir." Samuel said, and terminated the connection. After

that, everyone was silent for several moments.

Stephanie was the one to break it. "So," she said, "what now? If they have Blaine, they've got Zeke too."

Samuel shook his head. "We have to get to the Prophet." He said. "But we also have to get to the hangar and put it out of commission. Both are vital."

"We don't have the manpower to split up again," Victoria said. "Both of those places will be heavily guarded, as they're the best targets. We don't have the offensive capacity to take them on without all of us, even with Magnus. We could-"

"I hate to interrupt," Magnus said cautiously, "but I have to tell you something before this goes any further. My primary goal here is to see the main hangar completely destroyed. After that, my orders are to capture the Prophet alive."

"Alive?" Landon asked loudly. "They want us to capture the Prophet alive?"

Magnus shook his head. "ONI wasn't going to tell you until you arrived outside the Control Room. You should know: Agnes and those on the Atonement know nothing of these orders. You can't hold them responsible. These orders come from those on the Ares, the fools back at the Office of Naval Intelligence that believe they own me." Samuel saw that the other Spartan's hands were clenched tightly at his sides, and he could hear the bitterness in his voice.

"What are you saying, Magnus?" He asked.

"I'm saying that, while I will hold true to my primary goal, I will not be bringing home a live Prophet for the spooks at ONI to experiment on and inevitably kill. The hangar needs to be destroyed; that will receive no argument from me. The Prophet, however, needs to be killed as well. That's the only end to this war." He paused. "They all have to die, every last damn one of them."

"Alright," Stephanie said, interjecting, "so we agree that we're killing the Prophet and destroying the hangar. What about Blaine and Zeke?"

Samuel gritted his teeth. He'd zoned out for part of the conversation as he thought about that very question. And he didn't like the answer.

"We have to deal with the hangar first." He said. "Then we take the Prophet." His fists clenched subconsciously. "We'll have to pray that they can take care of themselves."

"What?" Victoria asked, dumbfounded. "You can't be serious! We have to help them!"

"We can't." Sam said. "We don't even know where they're being kept."

Still, Victoria protested. "Gael can figure it out." She said. "I'm sure if we just put her in-"

"It doesn't matter." Samuel interrupted. "Even if we find out where they're being kept, as you mentioned, we don't have the manpower to split up, and we don't have the time to get them before dealing with the Prophet and the hangar. Besides," he smiled, "if I know the two of them, the Brutes unlucky enough to be assigned guard-duty are probably already dead by now."

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine gritted his teeth as he was thrown against the far wall, flung by his arms that still adamantly refused to work. He fell to the floor in a heap.<p>

"Oh, ho-ho," the Spartan said, trying hard to stand on shaky legs. He tasted blood in his mouth, but ignored it. "Not bad." He said to the red-armored Chieftain. "Maybe next time you'll follow through and stop throwing like my grandmother."

Instantly, the alien was at it again. It charged up to him, gripped him by the shoulders and slammed him into the wall. "Listen, Demon," it said, "one more word, and I'll--"

"Do nothing and like it." Blaine finished, laughing. "Your so-called Prophet already told you: no killing the Demon. If you do, it's your head."

"It may be worth it." The Brute answered.

"Then by all means," Blaine said quickly, "just let me give you directions to Hell so you don't get lost on the way th--"

"Enough!"

Blaine was slammed into the wall once more. He felt something in his back crack, and it wasn't mechanical. Against all instinct, he laughed.

"Aw," he said, "did I hit a nerve? Poor Chieftain; I'd be angry too if I looked--"

This partial comment earned the Spartan a trip across the metal floor, skidding all the way to the door, where he crashed in a heap.

And then, to his surprise, it opened.

"What--"

"What is going on in here?" Mercy shouted, floating into the room. The Brute Major by his side kicked Blaine in the ribs hard enough to roll him into the middle of the small room. At the same time, a strange-looking creature floated into the room. It was an odd, purple and pink color, and it took Blaine a moment to recognize the creature as a Covenant Engineer, a.k.a. Huragok.

"Nothing, Hierarch," the Chieftain said. "I was just watching the prisoner."

"I told you to watch from the outside." Mercy growled. "Now get out!"

Leave the Huragok to do its job!"

"Yes, Hierarch," the Brute said. A second later, it rushed from the room. Blaine smiled.

"He called you an old fool." He lied. "Said you were full of lies and hypocri-"

"Enough of your lies, Demon," the Prophet snapped. He seemed to be calming down.

Blaine would fix that.

"You're right," the Spartan admitted, "that was an obvious lie." He looked at the Brute Major. "Honestly, what Brute can correctly pronounce the word 'hypocrisy'?"

"Silence!" Mercy shouted, angry once more. He turned to the Brute. "Wait outside until your Chieftain returns. At that time, give him my orders to guard this cell from the outside. He is not to enter for any reason other than if there is a threat to security. When you've done this, go and guard the other Demon."

"You've still got Zeke in here?" Blaine asked. "I'm shocked. Figured he would've gotten out and wreaked havoc by now. Honestly, you really should keep an eye on him. After all," he nodded his head to the Brute, "your ugly primates here sure aren't doing a very good job with security. I think I killed more than thirty by myself since I got on."

"Demon!" the Major shouted, raising a Brute Spiker. It flinched in his direction, but Mercy held up a hand.

"The Demon likes to talk." He said. "Ignore him. Come. We will leave the Huragok to tend to the terminal." With that, they turned to leave.

"Hey, baby-Kong," Blaine shouted, more as a last taunt than anything, "you-"

"And you!" the Prophet snapped. "If anything happens to this Huragok while I am away, your death will be slow and torturously painful. This is a creature left to us by the gods, and you shall not disgrace it any more than you already have with your presence. Do you understand me?"

"Gotcha," he said. "But do I get my phone-call now?"

The door to the chamber slid shut.

"Damn." Blaine said. "Guess not."

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm not kidding. Hit me one more time, and I'm gonna get-"<p>

Another punch to the stomach left Ezekiel coughing up blood and slammed his back against the wall six inches behind him. To make matters worse, his wrists felt like they were going to fall off.

"I have had enough of your mouth, Demon." The Brute Chieftain in front of him growled.

"And I've had enough of the stench coming from yours. Want a Tic-Tac? I can just grab you one, if you like. Just let my arms down from here-"

"Shut-up!" the Brute shouted. Ezekiel clapped his hands.

"That's an American phrase." He said. "You're catching on. Not bad. Now if only you didn't hit like a guy from-"

Once more, the alien's fist crashed into his stomach, and Zeke felt himself start to cough uncontrollably. Blood splashed against the inside of his visor and slid downward, leaving red, painfully long streaks. A few seconds into it, he regained his control.

"Are you finished?" The Brute asked calmly.

"You kiddin' me?" Zeke asked, shaking his head as he coughed slightly. "You'll tire out before I do."

The Brute reared back to throw another, but stopped when the door slid open.

"I don't suppose you could send in a Grunt or something," Zeke said as Mercy floated inside, "you know, someone more capable of mental torture? This whole physical aspect is boring me." He shook his head, looking at the ground. "None of your so-called soldiers know how to throw a punch." Suddenly, he jerked his head up to face the Prophet. "I could show them how, if you'd just let me-"

"Enough," the Prophet said calmly. "I cannot listen to any more of your talk, Demon." He turned to the Brute. "There will be two more guards coming to assist you. Another will be stationed outside. Watch the Demon, and do not let your guard down."

"Of course, Hierarch," the Chieftain answered. "I will not fail you."

"See to it that you do not." Mercy answered, and promptly left.

Zeke whistled. "Wow," he said, "that guy sure has a lot of faith in you." He grinned dangerously even though the Brute couldn't see it. "What do you think is going to happen to you when I get out of here?"

"You will not escape, Demon. I will make sure of it."

\* \* \*

><p>"How much further is the hangar?" Landon asked. The Spartans had proceeded through the ship as quietly as possible in order to maintain the element of surprise on their next attack, and it had worked exceedingly well thus far.<p>

"We're close." Magnus said, leading the way. He passed a door on the right side of the hallway and stopped suddenly. "I need you and Jason to go through that door and follow the hallway up two levels. Take

the first door on the left when you get to that height. It'll be an entrance to the hangar and you can use your rifles from there. Give us the green-light when you get there."

Victoria watched as they both instinctively turned to Samuel for a confirmation. The brown-armored Spartan nodded, and the two of them took off.

"What about us?" Stephanie asked, really to no Spartan in particular, since the message was broadcast to everyone. "What's the plan once we get into the hangar?"

"Well, for one thing, we can count on heavy resistance once we get in," Magnus said. "We have to take that into account."

"I already have," Samuel said. "We'll let Vic go in first, cloaked to avoid detection. Once she's inside and hidden, Stephanie and I will rain on them with every explosive we can muster." He paused, looking directly at Magnus. "Follow us in, as silently as you can, and use the Hard-Sound Rifle for as long as you can. When that's outâ€¦hit them with everything you've got."

"What about me?" Victoria asked, puzzled.

"Your job is the one that's going to win us the fight." Sam said. "You're going to find a terminal inside and insert Gael into it, and then she's going to drain the atmosphere from the room and override the door-locks."

"That's a lot for her to do in a short time," Victoria said cautiously. "We're not even sure if she can get into the system, much less override half-a-dozen protocols."

"She'll do just fine." Samuel said confidently. "Now, get ready; the hallway turns to the right, and then it'll be the door at the end of that hall." He pointed to an intersection twenty yards away from them.

Victoria sprinted to the front of the group. "I'll check ahead." She said, activating her cloaking technology and running silently to the intersection. She peeked around the corner-

And stopped.

There were three Brute Majors standing in front of the doorway, each one armed with a Brute Shot and facing the intersection. After checking the opposite direction, she darted back to the group.

"We've got a problem." She said. "There are three Brutes. They're low-ranking, but they're guarding the door, and I have no doubt that we'll lose the element of surprise."

"The doorways block sound," Stephanie said. "We can do it quietly."

"I've got a better idea." Magnus said, rolling and cracking his wrists that were as thick as the heavy weapons the Spartans were carrying. He walked up to the intersection, motioning first for the others to stay hidden, and then walked out into view of the

aliens.

"Magnus!" Victoria whispered, sure that he was about to blow their cover. She activated her camouflage again and sprinted to the intersection.

"Demon!" one of the Brutes yelled as Magnus raised his hands, palms open. It started to reach for a terminal on the wall.

"No!" Magnus said, and the Brute stopped, puzzled. "I'm turning myself in. Please, just take me before the Chieftain finds me again." He was holding his arms out, still open, and walking slowly toward the group. "I'm unarmed."

The Brute in the back nodded to the others, and they slowly began walking toward him. He kept going too, and was three meters away from the two Brutes in front and less than eight meters from the one in back when he stopped.

"Big mistake," he growled, and Victoria watched as the front of his hands began to glow bright green. Two seconds later, all Hell broke loose.

Victoria could only watch in awe as a dozen Fuel Rods erupted from the giant Spartan's hands, mowing through the three unprepared aliens as if they were nothing. In five seconds, it was all over, and only three broken, burnt bodies remained.

Stephanie was the first one to respond.

"What in the world was that?" She shouted over the intercom. Victoria turned around to see her and the others standing behind her. "I want one!"

Samuel's response was much quieter, and more simple. "Magnus," he said, his tone deathly calm, "you didn't tell us you could do that."

The giant Spartan rolled his wrists again as he turned to face them. "Yeah," he said carefully, "ONI made some changes when they brought me in. You remember one of the big rules? Something about never, ever going to private companies for enhancements?" He paused, rubbing the back of his helmet with his hand. "Apparently they changed their minds."

"What else can you do?" Stephanie asked.

"That's the biggest enhancement," Magnus said. "That right there was. Most of the others revolve around the shield-system, physical strength," he paused, thinking, "oh, and there was an idea for a type of Gravity Cannon, similar to what the Prophets use, but it didn't pan out."

"That's insane," Victoria said disbelievingly. She shook her head. "That's just wrong."

"How many Fuel Rods can you hold?" Stephanie asked.

"I've got a dozen to an arm." Magnus said. "That makes twenty-four. I simply pop this piece out-" Something clicked out of place on his arm



and the top of the armor, from the wrist to the elbow, pulled up and revealed over a dozen glowing green projectiles. "They reload in here."

"That's ridiculous," Samuel said, laughing slightly. "I love it, but it's ridiculous. You know that?"

"Yeahâ€¦"

"Guys," Jason's voice echoed over the intercom. "Is Vic in there yet? We're ready."

"Give me twenty seconds." She answered. "Then give 'em Hell."

\* \* \*

><p>"Okay," Samuel's voice sounded in the ears of the other Spartans. "Get ready. We're on in ten."<p>

"You ready?" Landon asked, checking his rifle and glancing to Jason. The other Spartan nodded calmly, the rifle already resting against his shoulder.

"Alright," Sam's voice came again, "let's go."

Both Spartans gave the green light and approached the door. It opened before them, revealing the enormous main hangar.

"Holy shit," Landon said, looking around. It was unbelievable; easily five-hundred meters from end to end, and the width was a far cry from the cramped hallways of the spacecraft as well. What looked like nearly two-hundred Covenant soldiers, made up of Brutes, Grunts, Jackals, and Hunters, wandered around two floors below the two Spartans.

"Wait a minute," Jason said suddenly, "where are the ships?"

It took Landon a second to process what Jason was talking about, but when he did, he shook his head rapidly, puzzled. "What the Hell?"

There were only three ships in the enormous hangar. All three of them were Phantom-class dropships, and were in the dead-center of the chamber. For hundreds of Covenant soldiers, it seemed almostâ€¦wrong.

"Sam," Jason said, "are you seeing this?"

"Yeah," the other Spartan answered, "I see it too." He paused, then added, "or, rather, the lack of it."

"Do we still continue as planned?"

"Yes." Samuel answered. "Victoria's already inside. She'll find a terminal, and we'll take out a couple-hundred Covenant in one strike. Just make sure to keep us covered, and watch your level too. Got it?"

"Yep," he answered, "we got it, Goliath."

"I'm listening too," Landon said with a laugh, "just in case you thought I wasn't."

"I'm surprised." Samuel said rather emotionlessly. "Now let's do this." And he terminated the connection.

\* \* \*

><p>"Drop that cell, Unggoy, and the Jackals will have their next meal!" The Brute Major in charge of Popon's unit growled as he and two other Grunts worked to carry a power-cell to one of the dropships. Of the eighty-four Grunts in the hangar, only six of them had been assigned actual manual labor.<p>

Of course, he had been designated as one such Unggoy.

"Stupid monkey," he mumbled as quietly as he could manage. Together, the three Grunts hauled the cell half the way to the dropship before stopping.

"You!" a Brute nearby growled upon seeing them. "Get moving!"

Popon was about to answer when an explosion resounded throughout the hanger and a flash of green light erupted at the end he had just come from. Through squinted eyes, he could make out two shapes.

"Demons!" a Brute shouted. In an instant, every soldier in the room was armed and firing. They poured plasma and spiked projectiles in the direction of the doorway, but the two Demons just ran to one side and kept on firing. Human-made rockets and Covenant Fuel Rods flew through the air and consumed whatever soldier was unlucky enough to be in their path.

"Unggoy," the Brute that had stopped Popon and his unit a moment before snapped. "Get them!" He pointed in the general direction of the two Demons.

"What you think?" Popon asked. "Me fodder?"

The Brute didn't answer. It looked like it was about to, but it suddenly began to convulse, and it fell to the ground, writhing in agony and pawing at its head. The Grunts looked around anxiously as Brutes began to fall one by one. There were no sounds, no shots being fired. There were no trails from human or Covenant rifles.

There was nothing.

"Every Grunt for self!" Popon shouted, turning and running as fast as he could to the nearest dropship. He watched in horror as Brute after Brute collapsed, each one falling into terrible fits and convulsions and some even beginning to be bleed from their helmets.

\_Ooh,\_ he thought, \_things get no worse.\_

And then, things got worse.

Red lights flooded the hangar, and there were terrible howls and yells as the Brutes and Jackals left alive began to drop to the floor, all at once. Popon realized immediately what was happening: someone was draining the atmosphere.

\_No,\_ he thought as dozens of Covenant collapsed, \_someone has  
\_\_\*\*drained\*\*\_\_ the atmosphere.\_

He turned and ran as best he could toward the dropship, but only made it another six or seven steps before a trio of impacts to his back threw him forward, onto his face and his re-breather. He'd seen enough combat to know what it had been: what the humans called a "Battle Rifle."

Carefully, he rolled over and glanced black, looking for the source. Sure enough, there was another Demon, on the second floor of the hangar, looking straight down at him through the weapon's scope. Popon said a silent prayer to the gods, just as the gun fired again.

\* \* \*

><p>"Area secure, Sam," Stephanie's voice came over the link. "The doors are locked and we're set to go from this side." She was on the opposite end of the enormous hangar, closest to the ship's rear.<p>

"Second and third floors are secure and locked down." Landon said, checking in.

"Doors opposite the rear of the ship are locked down tight." Magnus said.

"Good," Samuel said in response to the trio of green lights. "Victoria, how is it inside those ships?"

"Gael's almost done with the first one." She said. "Give me ten more seconds here, and then about a minute for each of the others. Now that I've found the port to get her in the system, it should go faster."

"Great," Sam said, "just keep doing what you're doing. We'll watch the doors."

A green light flickered in his HUD.

"After this," Magnus asked, "we're heading for the Control Room, right?"

Samuel nodded even though the other Spartan couldn't see him from his position. "Yeah," he said. "We go as fast as we can, and we let nothing slow us down. Anything between here and there, we put them down quickly and with whatever force necessary to keep pace."

"Sounds like my kind of plan." Landon interjected. "I've got rockets, and that trigger is just screaming my name."

"Not yet it's not." Stephanie said. "You just keep your trigger-happy self focused on those doors."

"Agreed," Samuel said.

"Oh," Landon whined, "none of you are any fun. The only one who can

even appreciate my love for firepower is Blaine, and he's not here." He paused, then added, "well, and Magnus too, now that I think about it."

"Just watch the doors," Samuel said dismissively.

"I'm on the second ship." Victoria said. "Sorry. It took me longer than anticipated for the first one, but I'm past all the firewalls now, so it should be quick."

"No problem." Sam answered. "Just hurry so we can get out of here." He focused on Stephanie, Landon and Jason. "Did you guys take care of the other hangars?"

"We took care of all but one hangar by clearing it and damaging the pressurizing systems and airlocks. The last one, we simply disposed of the only present dropship."

"Fair enough," he said. "You're sure there was only one ship there?"

"Positive," Jason said. "We checked."

"You don't have much faith in us, Sam," Landon joked. "You think we could miss a dropship?"

"Dropship?" Stephanie asked. "You could miss a full-fledged cruiser if you weren't looking for it."

"Don't make me come down there." Landon said jokingly. "Don't make me. I will end you."

"Oh, you will, huh? Well I guess--"

"Okay!" Samuel said, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. "No one is "ending" anyone else until we get back to Earth, got it?"

Three green lights flickered in his HUD.

"Good." He said, then mumbled something incomprehensible under his breath about babysitting. "Now--"

"I'm almost done with the third ship." Victoria said. "Twenty more seconds, and all three of these things will be nothing but overly-large paperweights to anyone without the input code."

"Perfect," Samuel said. He focused on a secure link with every soldier in the room. "Get ready, everyone. It's time to move out."

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine sat and watched the Engineer in silence as it toyed with the terminal at the corner of the room. The Brutes had long since left, and while his body was in agony, it didn't do him any good to try to escapeâ€|as even if he did, he wasn't about to do any damage to anything.<p>

Suddenly, the computer began to beep and glow in blue light, much as it had been doing before Blaine had knocked the Brute backwards into

it. The Engineer began to move its tentacles and make whistling noises, all too excitedly.

"Oh, shut up, will you?" Blaine snapped, bitter to most everything at the moment. The Engineer, however, appeared curious, rather than put-off by the statement. It slowly began to float toward him, still making its strange noises.

Blaine wouldn't have it. He slid against the back wall and stood up.

"Back off!" He said. He'd already been abused by the Brutes. Being screwed up even further by some kind of strange, bloated, balloon was not on his priority list.

But still, the alien persisted, coming closer and reaching out to his left arm with its tentacles. In a second, two of them had separated into fine cilia and were playing with the metallic pieces on his armor.

Blaine pulled away. "Get away from me." He said, still unsure about the alien. But, after it reached again and got only a second's worth of "toying" in, the words "Critical Failure" vanished from his HUD, replaced by, "System Malfunction."

\_What the Hellâ€|\_

\* \* \*

><p>"What's wrong?" Zeke taunted. "Can't take a little? I was just playing." He laughed loudly as the Brute Chieftain stood mere inches from his face, aiming a Brute Shot at his stomach and pressing it into his gut.<p>

"One more word, Demon," the Brute said. "Say one more word."

Zeke cocked his head back. "Oneâ€|moreâ€|word." He said calmly.

The alien let out an aggravated roar and held the Brute Shot in one hand, punching the Spartan in the gut with the other. After that, it turned to the other Brutes. "Watch him." It said. "I'll be back."

With that, the Chieftain left the room. Zeke grinned coldly.

\* \* \*

><p>Drannus shook his head as the Chieftain left the room, enraged. The Demon had a knack for getting under its adversary's skin, there was no doubt about that. He simply reminded himself that he had to ignore anything the human could say.<p>

Beside him, Lottinus was growling lowly. He was more susceptible to the Demon's taunts, Drannus thought. Even though Drannus, as a Major, had been paired with the Brute Minor through several missions, the less-experienced Brute still did not have the experience he needed.

"What are you thinking over there, freaks?" The Demon asked. "I hope your Chieftain knows that I was just playing."

Drannus growled. Their Chieftain was another of the Brutes that had proven his worth in physical prowess, but had never actually gotten a handle on combat. His tactics were faulty and his plans not well organized. To make matters worse, he was extremely temperamental.

"Hey!" The Demon shouted. "I'm talking to you! Are you gonna answer-"

Apparently, Lottinus had had all he could take. Without warning, the Brute Minor leapt forward and punched the Demon four times in the stomach, then rammed his shoulder into it, slamming the human against the wall. He turned to face Drannus.

"That shut him up." The Brute said. Drannus was about to respond when he realized that something was terribly wrong.

"No!" he barely managed the word before the Demon had brought its legs straight out and wrapped them around the neck of the Brute Minor, bent at the knees. Before Lottinus could even think of struggling, the human jerked them to the right, and Drannus heard his brother's neck break in a half-dozen places.

Drannus exploded. As his packmate fell to the floor in a heap, dead eyes staring up at him, the Brute Major let out a roar and charged forward, grabbing his own Brute Shot and thrusting it forward-

He missed. The Demon swung to the side, and the Brute Shot's bayonet collided against the wall. Drannus pulled back to swing again, but stopped short as the Demon bent its leg and brought its knee straight up-

Drannus died suddenly then, the spike on the Demon's leg impaling him at the chin and all the way up, into his skull, then staying there for several seconds before being pulled out. The Brute was dead before he even realized what had happened.

\* \* \*

><p>"Sucks to be you," Zeke growled, removing the blade mounted to his leg from the alien's skull and letting the Brute's corpse fall to the ground with a dull thud. He was about to attempt to get free when the door started to slide open.<p>

Instantly, he engaged his Active Camo and prayed that the Brute checking on the noise would be one of the slower ones.

"What-" The Brute Minor that entered the room started, looking around, no doubt stunned by all the blood. "The Demon!" it shouted, running from the room. "The Demon has escaped!"

"Yes!" Zeke whispered. Then he took a deep breath, let the pain in his ribs subside, and executed the hard part of the plan.

With all the strength he could muster, he flipped upwards and locked his arms in place with the help of his MJOLNIR suit and some assistance from Demon locking the joints, effectively leaving him with his feet almost at the ceiling and looking down on the Energy Tether holding him in place.

\_There,\_ he thought, balancing and looking at the small, electronic device that the tether was connected to on both sides. \_That's the power-source.\_

"Ready?" Demon asked.

"Almost," Zeke said, taking a deep breath. His wrists felt like they were on fire, and his arms weren't exactly comfortable either. But he had to be prepared. In essence, he was going to have to fall onto the tether's power-source, and he was only going to get one shot.  
"Go!"

The locks on his arms came undone, and they bent instantly. He bent his knees, activating the implanted plasma-blade as he had done a minute before, aimed-

And hit it.

The plasma-coated blade cut through the energy source and shorted it out, causing the Energy Tether to disappear instantly.

And causing the Spartan to fall face-first onto the ground.

"Damn it," he cursed, standing up and rolling his wrists, cracking them. He heard loud footsteps outside the room and knew that someone had heard him crash. Silently, he crept up to the side of the door.

"Demon!" a Brute growled as the door opened. But it never said anything else, as Zeke thrust the blade on his elbow deep into its chest and pulled it sideways, rending at least three of its vital organs and leaving it staring at him, gargling on blood.

To Ezekiel's amusement, it was the Brute Chieftain that had done nothing but beat the Hell out of him for what seemed like hours. With the blade still in the alien's chest, he inched close and whispered, "payback's a bitch, ain't it?"

\* \* \*

><p>The Prophet's voice echoed over the ship's intercom. "Check on the Demon, Grarnum," he said. "The other has escaped. See to it that this one does not. Kill it now!"<p>

The Brute Chieftain smiled wickedly. "Of course, Hierarch," he growled, even though the Prophet had no way of hearing him. He attached his Gravity Hammer to his back and walked up to the glowing door that the Demon was being held behind.

\_Your time is up, Demon.\_ He thought coldly. He was going to enjoy this.

The door slid open, and Grarnum stepped inside-

SMASH!

Something crashed into the Chieftain's face so hard that his faceplate bent inward. It indented the front of his skull and the metal cracked all the way down. Instantly, he was soaring backwards,

and didn't stop until he hit the nearest wall behind him—more than forty feet away.

The Brute never once touched the ground.

Curled up in a heap on the ground, in more pain than he could even imagine or comprehend at that moment, Grarnum could vaguely make out the sound of a voice from the doorway.

"Now," the Demon yelled, its voice echoing coldly down the hall, permeating it with an air of foreboding, "I'm pissed."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Again, I will have the next one re-written just as fast I can get it. To anyone who had any input or ideas for the story, I also intend on emailing you as soon as I get the time. Forgive me if it does not happen immediately, as the chapter will be given top priority over anything else (including sleeping, but not including eating, caffeine-filled beverages, and, most importantly, my girlfriend in the event that I find her on MSN). Thanks all! Please review and have a good weekend!<strong>

\*\*Oh, and P.S. - Anyone who has read the reviews I'm sure is aware of this, but "1 way ticket" is the profile of a certain special someone who is on the otehr side of the planet right now. If you want her to get your thanks for this, you can simply say it in the review, and she'll get it, as she's now reading this once again. lol. If not...well, I'll still tell her in case she didn't read anyone who said something last time. lol. Thank you everyone!\*\*

\*\*EDIT: Taylor114 has already left a review for this chapter, and addressed something I meant to, but somehow forgot about (just rushing, I guess). Magnus' adjustments, as was said, may seem kind of "over-the-top," but please note that I did want it this way. The idea was that, because the adjustments to the body weren't enough (growth hormones, DNA alterations, etc), and because this organization has little to no faith in Zulu or previous Spartans, they went for something that was completely unheard of. They turned to a private organization which, anyone who knows about the differences between government action and that of a private company, knows would likely take a completely different path in weapons-development.\*\*

\*\*That being said, Magnus and his adjustments are not without their faults and their penalties. I simply didn't draw attention to them in this particular chapter because I wanted him to come across, essentially, as a kind of "superhuman" with power to, as Taylor114 put it, "destroy anything in his path in a matter of seconds." Trust me...this is not the case, and I hope that everyone can give me a little rope. I promise, PROMISE you, I will not hang myself. ;) Thanks everyone in advance for an open mind.\*\*

## 47. Chapter 46: The Prophet

\*\*Author's Notes: Alright...yeah, I know. "It's been forever!" "Are you still alive?" "Where's Zulu Company?"\*\*

\*\*I do apologize. Things got particularly hectic for me at the end of my summer...and, as any college student can tell you, moving in as a



college Freshman can be rather...time-consuming. The adjustment period, while not terrible, has taken a nice chunk out of the time I have available to write. Add that to the classes I'm taking, the weekends I'm trying to make it home to see friends and family...well, it's been a little stressed. That being said, I'm going to do the very best I can to get back on track...but I'm afraid I can't make you all any promises.\*\*

\*\*As I've learned already, it's not High School. Things are different, and they take a lot more time. The readings alone have been a major switch in my time-management (I'm not actually used to DOING the assigned reading...as I never really had to in HS). I will try to post as often as I can and, while I promise you that I WILL finish this story, I cannot give you pre-determined dates or times. All I can suggest (and ask) is that you add this to your alerts if you would like to see its conclusion (and, if I have any fans left by now, the sequel).\*\*

\*\*Now, to get back in the swing of things, I'm heading for the Review Responses!\*\*

\*\*Mhop12: Hey! No worries about the last chapter and the review...I kind of went a month without posting, so I'm never going to say a word to anyone about times and dates...lol. Thanks for your review, and, in regards to Magnus...well, we'll see. ;)\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: First of all, I want to put to rest any concerns you have about Magnus being some "unstoppable super-force" or anything of the like. Trust me...as I said at the conclusion of the last chapter after seeing your review, I want it to be a little "over-done," as you so aptly put it. I wanted his big return to be just that. But, as the story progresses and concludes, I think you'll see that he's not without his faults.\*\*

\*\*Thanks for the compliments on the POV's. Truthfully, I've never considered a Jackal POV on account of we have so little information available to us from Bungie, and because they never actually say anything in English (to my knowledge), even in the bounds of the game. Granted, I know a lot of it is simply translation...but the developers didn't even attempt it with the Jackals, lol. So...I'm reluctant to wander into such unfamiliar territory. But, thanks again for your review, and I hope my description of Magnus doesn't frighten you off from reading the rest. I wouldn't want someone who has been with me for so long to be put off simply by the wrong idea. :)\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: lol, I tried to e-mail and PM you, but neither one worked...as far as I can tell. I hope that, if you try to review again (please? lol), that it works for you much better. If not...I'm going to change my profile to include my actual e-mail this evening, so that people don't have to bother with the God-forsaken PM system if they don't want to. Anyways, thanks for trying to review (multiple times), and I hope that you're still here after my month-long absense.\*\*

\*\*SpartanOphir 06: Hey, I know you got sent off here a while back, and I'm disappointed I didn't manage to get this posted, or even talk to you very much before that. I hope if you read this, you'll drop me a line. As for the actual story...thanks for the compliments, and the very good catch toward the end (I fixed that the moment I read it).

Hope your break has been enjoyable, and I'll talk to you later!\*\*

\*\*superultramario: Actually, when the Flood do arrive...you'll see pretty much everything that Halo has introduced up through H3. And, just a little information, as far as I know, the Flood do infect and take over Grunts, Jackals, and Drones, but because their bodies are ill-suited for the task of physical combat (in contrast with human, Jiralhanae, and Sangheili), they are turned into the Carriers that we see in-game. As for Hunters: because they are actually a mass of many of the Lekgolo worms, it's impossible for an Infection Form to "latch" onto any kind of central nervous system. That's why you never see "Hunter Forms," even though many people originally spread rumors that the Tank Forms from H3 were just that. Thanks for the review, and I hope that clears it up!\*\*

\*\*Lecter42: I like both the idea of the axe...and the new word (I honestly had never heard anything remotely similar before). However, I need this remarkable piece of junk...\*\*

\*\*Now, for the story. In regards to Magnus and his reasons for neglecting to capture a Prophet...many of his personal "mysteries" will be revealed over time, and in his own personal account that I do later on. The Hard Sound Rifle...I wish I could elaborate on for you. Unfortunately, I can't find any solid information (or even decent speculation) on how such a weapon would work. I checked everything from to Halopedia (my favorite source nowadays...) to ILoveBees...I can only find where it was used. There is no explanation of how or with what technology. For that...I do apologize.\*\*

\*\*As for the Engineer and keeping things Canon...well, I talked with a friend (or two) early on about this story (like before I did the first chapter), and decided that one of my "biomechanical" characters would have an encounter like that. It fit nicely that it went along with the Canon...but, it was coincidence, if you know what I mean. And yes, I think you spelled the name right...but I'm not entirely sure.\*\*

\*\*Oh, finally...their armor...Blaine's, because it is connected directly to his body, wouldn't be easily removed (since it would take the "approval" of the in-suit AI to allow it to be without literally ripping his body to shreds). And Zeke's...basically I just used the rationalization that they were unconscious for a very short time, and held captive for only a little longer. That and, as far as Mercy goes, his normal "calm, collected" state and his wisdom are particularly rattled at this point, after the loss of Regret, High Charity, and (as far as he knows) perhaps even Truth. So...I don't chalk him up to being at full-potential. It's all thin, I know, but it really just didn't come into play as much as it could have for me.\*\*

\*\*Thanks a lot for your review, and I hope I can get a few more of these out for you and everyone else to read!\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: First off, in answer to your question: yes and no. All of my characters are 100 percent original in that they did NOT come from games, programs, movies, books, stories, etc. However, they are not completely my doing, as most all of them are actually based on the personalities of people I grew up. A lot of them are taken to the "extreme," you understand what I mean...but the base personality

is still there. Actually, that's what amuses me most when people comment on well how the team "goes together." Not to sound conceded...I know they go together at least semi-well, as I spent 12 years of my life interacting with several of them! lol. Also, I'm glad you liked Magnus' changes...and yes, Zeke does get to have a little fun in this one. But...not all fun, I'm afraid. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey! Thanks for reviewing, and I'm sorry it took so long to continue...moving on, I saw that you had some idea of what was coming. I'm glad a couple of people caught it and commented to me. Excellent catch, on your part and theirs.\*\*

\*\*1 way ticket: Hey you. :) Still can't believe you started reading this again, lol. You must have either been really bored or really desperate, huh? ;) No, but really, we talked about most of what you brought up in your reviews, lol. Though, if you have anything else, feel free to let me know. This one here...well, you can tell me if I did alright or if I butchered it. It's something new...that's for sure. Guess we'll find out! Thanks for all the reviews that you left me (even struggling to type them on a Japanese keyboard. :) I'm so proud of you.) See you this weekend! :)\*\*

\*\*iamzultan: Hey! Thanks a lot for your compliments on the escape and the Hard-Sound Rifle...they were both kind of "experimental" elements for me to add. In response to your questions: well...as you can see...the time it takes me varies considerably. Ideally...I can do a chapter in a week. However, being in college and being busy all the time...it might take me a little longer. However, if you're just looking for a time...for me to do a typical 8,000 word chapter...it takes me about 5-6 hours of solid typing, editing, proofing, research, etc. There are exceptions (like the chapter "Exact Science"), but that's average.\*\*

\*\*As for advice...I really don't consider myself experienced enough or good enough to start giving vague, overall advice. I've had a couple of people e-mail me with specific questions on things, and I'm more than happy to answer that...but I don't want to tell you, or anyone else, just how to go about your writing. However, one or two things I can tell anyone and everyone:\*\*

\*\*1: Have an outline before you start. Don't just "fly by the seat of your pants." It works for a few chapters. It will not work for an entire story (that is, if you're making a particularly long one).

>2: Stick with what you know when you can. That means characters and their personalities, weapons and supplies (obviously, Halo is a bit of an exception to that one), medical or very technical scientific ideas (I had a LOT of help with mine). And, failing that, do research. If you're writing for yourself, on your own deadlines, then BSing isn't necessary. I've use BS in every school-related paper I think I've ever done, but I adamantly refuse to use it here.<strong>

\*\*That's just vague, self-explanatory stuff. I do much better when I have a specific request, lol. If you have questions, my e-mail will be available on my Profile as of this evening .Thanks again!\*\*

\*\*USMC X: I do apologize if I made you sound like a "bad guy," as you

said...it truly wasn't my intention. I do value the input that I get from reviewers (especially current and former Armed Forces). And I'll remember what you said in conclusion to your post from now on: not a soldier, sir. A Marine. :)\*\*

\*\*Now, to the story: I think the whole thing with the formal dress and the ranking...like I said, it's all just stuff I kinda have to guess on. As you mentioned, one of the things I enjoy as far as freedoms go in regards to this story is that, in Halo...rank is (largely) overlooked. In regards to the dropships...well, you're not the only one to catch that. I think everyone will be in for a surprise later on. ;)\*\*

\*\*And I agree entirely on the parallel from the HS Rifles to Metroid. That includes the "useful" comment...freakin' waste of time blasters...\*\*

\*\*In regards to Magnus: he will not be a broken, "walk onto the field and slaughter all who oppose him" type of character. Dang it, if I wouldn't let Zeke do it, Magnus sure isn't going to. ;)\*\*

\*\*I hope you enjoy what's to come, and thank you once again for everything, both Zulu-related and not. :)\*\*

\*\*TheGreatValleyGuardian: lol! I'm glad you like Magnus' enhancements so much. Good to see someone so enthusiastic about it. Though, I warn you...a "god" he is not. A tank? That's a bit more fitting. And yeah...Blaine is not real happy. ;) And he's got a hammer. Bad combination for the little guys. And congrats on your X-Box Live account...mine recently shut down, and I don't have the money to pay for another one when I wouldn't be able to play all that much anyway...lol. Sorry. Anyway, thanks for your review, and I hope you enjoy what's on the way!\*\*

\*\*Samus117: Hey! Glad you liked Zeke's and Blaine's parts. In answer to your question: Magnus' arms are biomechanical, and they're big. Like, in diameter and such. Big enough that they can house the complete inner-workings of a Fuel Rod Cannon inside of them, and still have room for shield-systems, mechanical parts, etc. I'll shed just a bit more light on it during this chapter...but, in essence: you can just think of him having them inside his arms. Thanks for the review, and I hope that cleared things up a little!\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: I'm sorry to hear that you were having problems, and that something's amiss with your arms. I do hope it heals up soon. :) As for the actual story: thanks so much for the compliments, and you'll start to get a better look at Magnus really soon. In regards to Samuel's babysitting...I see your point. ;) lol. Do get well, and thanks again!\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hey man! Two months since you reviewed...another one before I got another chapter up. How sad...lol. I hope you find that, in the chapters to come, I get everyone a little piece of the action. I know I had a case of "three-character-focus," but I'm gonna try to get that rectified here and now. :) Thanks again for proofing this one for me...you caught more typos than I'd ever care to have read on here, lol.\*\*

\*\*ALRIGHT...now, after FAR too long...I give you Chapter 46: The

Prophet.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 46:<strong>

â€" \*\*The Prophet â€" \*\*

\*\*2300 Hours - February 1, 2553\*\*

\*\*Aboard the Covenant Assault Carrier - Outside Earth's Orbit\*\*

"Zeke," Demon's voice echoed in the Spartan's ears. He was already in pain, and in no mood to listen to the AI.

"What?" He snapped, running down the hall in dead silence, away from the chamber he was being held in minutes before.

"Two things," the AI said. "One: there's a weapons cache in the third door up ahead, on your left." After that, Demon stopped.

"And?" the Spartan asked bitterly.

"And we've got a problem."

"And that is what?"

"I ran a diagnostic, and you're suffering from a pulmonary laceration."

Zeke rolled his eyes. "English, Demon," he said.

"You've punctured a lung."

The statement hit Ezekiel like a ton of bricks. He entered the weapons cache and stopped cold. "What?" He asked. "How?"

"How?" The AI asked sarcastically. "I don't know. Maybe it's a side-effect from not knowing how to keep that mouth of yours shut and giving the Brutes every excuse in existence to beat the Hell out of you."

"It doesn't make sense." Zeke growled. "I feel fine-"

"And you will feel fine," Demon said, "for a few more minutes, anyway. Then breathing is going to get harder, and it's going to get painful to function. I've put biofoam in the wound, but it's a bandage, at best. Pulmonary laceration pretty much always results in pneumothorax."

"What the Hell is pneumo...whatever the Hell you just said?"

"Well, if you had stayed awake for even one of your medical lessons during your time at the Training G-"

"Less lecturing," the Spartan snapped, "more explaining."

"In Laymen's terms, it's a collapsed lung. You need medical attention, now."

Zeke sighed, suddenly feeling his breath being labored. He shook his head, convincing himself that he was fine before he'd been told that, and that it was all in his head. "How much time do I have?"

Demon took a few seconds. "In about an hour," he said, "the pain is going to get worseâ€¦a lot worse. Breathing is gonna get harder, but you'll still be able to function. An hour after that," the AI paused, "an hour after that, at the most, breathing will be the only thing you should be doing, at all. And, even then, the pain alone-"

"I don't give a damn what the pain feels like." Zeke snapped. "I just need to know how long I can fight for."

"Two hours," the AI said bitterly, "tops. After that, if you're still here on the ship, you'll be as good as dead. You won't be able to effectively wage war with anything."

"Got it," the Spartan answered, already beginning to feel the effects, regardless of whether or not they were strictly in his head. He glanced around the room for the first time since he'd entered.

\_For once,\_ he thought with some semblance of happiness, \_I caught a break.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Clear," Victoria's voice sounded in the heads of the other Spartans as she rounded another corner and kept sprinting down the halls of the Covenant starship.<p>

Magnus was next in line in the group, both cannons raised and ready for anything the Covenant could throw at them. Samuel followed, with Jason and Landon behind him, and Stephanie bringing up the rear. Every twenty seconds, infra-red visors were turned on, just in case something cloaked was waiting for them.

Samuel had had enough surprises for one day.

He rounded the corner Victoria had just disappeared behind and kept going, doing a quick check behind him to ensure that everyone was still following.

"Clear," her voice echoed again as she disappeared behind a sliding Covenant door, glowing in green light. Magnus was right behind her, and gaining.

Somehow, Sam couldn't help but feel uneasy about having Magnus return. He wasn't unhappy to see him, not at all. It was just that he grown accustomed to having seven total Spartans working together. The monster of a soldier added something new â€" something volatile â€" to the equation. From what they'd seen, he had more power than any of them, and he showed no signs of weakness. He was stoic and cold, focused and careful.

He was nothing like he had been the last time Samuel had seen him.

"Red door," Victoria said just as Samuel reached the previous one.

"It's locked up tight." A second later, she added, "no Covenant though."

"Got it," Sam said, "wait there." He focused on Stephanie. "When you pass through the next door, get far enough away for it to close, ready that cannon of yours, and cover our backs."

A green light flickered on his HUD.

Samuel slowed down as he came upon Magnus and Victoria, standing in front of a locked door.

"There's no place to insert a neuro-chip, so Gael can't get into this one." The indigo-armored Spartan said. She shrugged. "We can go around, but it'll take time—"

"I'll get it." Magnus suddenly said, stepping forward.

Samuel was about to respond when Victoria scoffed. "You're not strong enough to open a door that's shut that tight." She said. "Granted, if there was a place to grip, you could probably do it, but—" She trailed off.

"I know." He said calmly. A second later, he turned around and jogged halfway back to the last door that they had come through, stopped, and turned to a computer terminal mounted to one wall.

"What's he doing?" Vic asked. Samuel shook his head.

"No idea," he said, squinting.

Magnus put a hand up to the terminal and, for a second, nothing happened. Samuel began to wonder exactly what was going on when every light in the hallway began to short out.

"What the Hell?" Landon's voice sounded in his head. "What's he doing?"

The hall went completely dark, and as the Spartans' visors adjusted to the light, Magnus pulled his hand away from the terminal. Samuel saw the Spartan's hand make a jerk toward his chest, but Magnus stopped it.

"Let's go," he said, quickly walking up to Samuel. He started to go by, but Sam put his hand out, stopping him.

"What was that?" He asked, stunned. Something was eating him. It didn't make sense, and he just couldn't believe that ONI had given Magnus so much power. It was unreal.

There was a catch. There had to be.

\* \* \*

><p>"That's insane, man!" Landon said excitedly. Magnus scowled behind his visor.<p>

"Yeah," he said, trying to slow his breathing. "I know. Cool, isn't it?"

"Damn right it is!"

"That's one Hell of a trick." Jason said.

Magnus rolled his eyes. He couldn't get his breathing back to normal. "Let's go," he said, looking to Samuel, "we're wasting time."

The brown-armored Spartan nodded and motioned for Victoria to take off again. Immediately, she was gone, cloaked and half-way to the next door.

Magnus frowned. All he could think about was the discussion he'd had with Commander Black some time before leaving the Ares.

\* \* \*

><p>"You're not a free man." The Commander had said. "We own you. ONI owns you. And you'll do as you're told, or you will not like the consequences."<p>

Magnus, as was typical of him, only laughed. He'd heard countless threats like that since he was first taken from the Training Ground, but without a single true consequence. But this time was different.

"This will be the first mission in which you do not have a superior officer watching your every move." Black continued. "Because of that, to make sure that your goals are in sync with our own, an AI has been installed into your suit for the duration of this mission. It is not a "smart" AI, but it'll watch you." He paused then before adding, "and, with it, we'll be watching too."

Again, Magnus had simply rolled his eyes and went about his business as he prepared to leave. Black was a figurehead within ONI. He had no real power, no real say in anything. He was just a pawn.

Much like they wanted Magnus to be.

"You'd be wise to listen to what I have to say." Commander Black had said finally, when he had realized that Magnus really wasn't. "If you don't believe it, perhaps you'd be interested to know that your new armor is not without its limitations."

That had gotten the Spartan's attention. In a second, he was facing Black and waiting for the man to continue. It was at that point that the Commander put genuine fear into Magnus' being.

"Well, how about I just show you?"

Seconds later, Magnus' biomechanical arms began to burn like nothing he'd ever experienced. It felt like every single Fuel Rod that he was storing was detonating and radiating pure plasma through his skin and bone. In seconds, the pain was beginning to slowly radiate into his chest. He fought the urge to collapse, fought the urge to yell. He even had to fight the urge to rip the Commander's head from his shoulders, if only because his arms were in no condition to do it.

When Black had had his fun, Magnus' pain had suddenly gone awayâ€|just vanished. He recovered, inches away from hitting his



knees and still breathing heavily in excruciating pain, wondering what in the world was stopping him now from killing the spook in front of him.

"Now, that was just a taste of what can happen." Black had said with a smirk. "It stems from a chemical flowing through the lines in your arms that reacts with the shells enclosing an active Fuel Rod. The chemical will eat away at them, and your body will slowly be permeated with burning plasma and radiation. There are special parts built into your arms to counter the chemical, but the only thing keeping them active is the AI that we had installed."

Magnus remembered his answer to the statement. "Why?" He had said. He couldn't comprehend why ONI would install something like that on one of their own soldiers.

And then he'd understood: he refused to be one of their own. He would sooner die.

"Don't worry, Magnus." The man had continued. "There are only a few reasons that this can happen. The first is dependant on you. If you disobey a direct order, your armor will be remotely shut down, including the AI. Ironically, one of the few things that will still do its job is that chemical flowing through your arms."

Magnus wondered now why they hadn't shut him down the second he exited the Carrier. Back then, however, his answer had been simple. "And the other?"

At this, Black had shaken his head, almost as if he were truly disappointed with the answer. "Your suit is similar to the Mark VI armor that Spartan 117 wears, in that it has the ability to transfer its AI directly into a compatible system through the palm, and without the use of a neuro-chip. However, when you do this, the AI isn't available to control the parts in your arms that react with the Fuel Rods." He paused once more. "You see the problem, I'm sure."

\* \* \*

><p>Magnus shook his head, bringing himself back to the present as Victoria cleared another hall. He'd discovered on his own that there was actually a third way that he could accidentally trigger an outburst from the radiation, and that was to overexert the armor and fire too many of them, too rapidly. His fourteen shots into the backs of the cloaked Hunters had taught him that.<p>

And he could only imagine what else the freaks at ONI had done to limit his abilities. Something told him that the only way to find out would be to break a few rules and see the reaction.

His first plan had simply been to eject all of the Fuel Rods in his arms and do without the extra firepower. It turned out, he only truly had twenty-two shots available, as the last two, in the very back, were lodged there and incapable of moving. The spooks had really outdone themselves this time.

But that changed nothing. If they thought for one second that he was going to go and capture a Covenant Prophet just because they deemed it his "job," the fools at the Office of Naval Intelligence had another thing coming. Magnus was no pawn. Before the war was over, he

would make sure that they knew that.

He would make sure that everyone knew it.

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine smiled as he stepped over the broken body of his third Brute Chieftain since he'd left the room the alien's had detained him in. This particular soldier's ribs were sticking directly out of its back, and its spinal cord was twisted at in a horrible fashion, showing through its upper-back at one point.<p>

He walked around the next corner on his way to the control room-

And he stopped.

There, in the middle of the hallway, stood a single, red-armored Grunt, squaring off with him, holding a Plasma Grenade. Blaine instinctively looked behind him and checked around, looking for the ambush.

There wasn't one.

He smiled, holding his Gravity Hammer in his right hand out in front, tapping the head of it lightly in his left hand.

Suddenly, the Grunt crouched very slightly, and began to bounce the grenade in its hand, throwing it up a few inches into the air and catching it, then repeating.

Blaine was on the verge of laughing hysterically. This was, without a doubt, the bravest Grunt he'd ever seen.

It bounced the grenade again, still glaring at him. The bomb came down. The Grunt grabbed it, flicked its wrist toward the ceiling-

The grenade began to glow bright blue, and suddenly wouldn't move from the alien's palm. It was stuck.

"No!" The Grunt shouted, suddenly panicked. "No-no-no-no! Help!" It ran in circles, then turned and waddled down the hall for several feet before-

BOOM!

Blaine shook his head, eyes wide, unbelieving. He didn't know whether to laugh or feel sorry for the pitiful creature.

"Wow," he whispered. "Thatâ€|was the dumbest thing I've ever seen."

\* \* \*

><p>"The Demon is near." One of the Brute Majors in front growled, raising its Fuel Rod Cannon up to its shoulder. The other two followed suit, and Kikun immediately did the same.<p>

Kikun knew, however, that his Unggoy lifespan could be counted in seconds the moment the Prophet had assigned him and two others to go

with the three Brute Majors and hunt down the Demon. They hadn't even seen the creature yet, but both of his brethren had vanished in the narrow halls of the Assault Carrier.

The Grunt watched as the first of the Brutes rounded a corner, then nodded back to the others. The second one followed, and then the third-

CRACK!

Kikun shrieked as the first Brute to go around the corner dropped to the ground. There was a hole that ran all the way through its skull.

The other two opened fire before Kikun had even rounded the corner, but he could still hear something over the roar of the Fuel Rod Cannons. It took him a moment, but he finally realized that it was the Demon.

And it was laughing.

"Not this time!" the human yelled.

CRACK! CRACK!

Both Brute Majors fell, and Kikun was suddenly alone. He dropped the Fuel Rod Cannon, gripped a pair of Plasma Grenades and crawled into a corner, where he waited to die.

\* \* \*

><p>"This is it!" Victoria shouted, her voice echoing in the ears of every other Spartan in range. "I've found the door." She grinned widely.<p>

It was time.

\* \* \*

><p>"Seal the door!" Mercy shouted at the top of his lungs. He had barricaded himself with every soldier he could find, as close to the Control Room as he could manage without actually being inside.<p>

Instead of being in the ship's relatively small, cramped Control Room, he was in one of the two large, octagonal rooms that bordered it. The one he had decided to use had a diameter of about eighty-feet, a huge balcony more than fifty feet above the floor that overlooked the room, and a door at each of the eight "sides." The one behind him and off to the left led to the Control Room, while the one behind him was to be his escape-route to an emergency dropship.

Directly across from it, on the other side of the room, the Demons were trying to pound their way into his fortress.

"Those Demons are not to enter this place!" Mercy yelled. He'd called over forty Brutes, a dozen Hunters, and countless Grunts and Jackals to come to his aid only fifteen seconds before. But, so far, only eight of them had showed up.

The rest were on their way.

"Hierarch!" one of the Brutes that was standing near the locked, red-lit door roared, "the Demons..."

BOOM!

Something hit the door from the other side, rattling it enough that the Prophet could see the ship's structure shaking from the other side of the room. Mercy was about to call for additional support when the door suddenly opened several inches, and he could make out the body of one of the larger Demons on the other side.

"Demons!" one of the Brutes roared, but before any sort of attack could be launched, the light around the door shorted out, and it slid completely open. Before it had even opened fully, green bursts of plasma soared into the room and impacted with the four Brutes that were guarding the door, engulfing them entirely.

"Guess who!" One of the Demons shouted with a laugh as six of them poured into the room.

Mercy glanced nervously around the room as what remained of his private guard moved forward to block the way between the Demons and himself.

"Now," he said calmly, trying to buy himself some time, "I'm sure we can settle this." He paused. "Perhaps, you would be interested in the lives of your allies?"

BOOM!

At that precise moment, two objects slammed into the door that was half-way between Mercy's escape-route and the door the humans had entered through. The Prophet could make out the shapes of two bodies, indenting the door from the opposite side.

The brown-armored Demon stepped forward. "I don't think that'll be necessary." It said coolly.

Even as it did, the door slid open, and the white-armored human stepped out, a Gravity Hammer draped over one shoulder, being held in its right hand. "What'd I miss?" The one they called "Blaine" asked.

"Well," Mercy said, now nervous, "perhaps the other? The black Demon?"

And, as if on cue, the door opposite the one that "Blaine" had just come through slid open as a trio of cowering Grunts scurried into the room, screaming at the top of their lungs.

"Fool," the black-armored Demon said as it walked casually inside. It turned to face Mercy. "You're going to have to finish what you started."

\* \* \*

><p>"Thought we'd lost you guys," Samuel said, his voice echoing in

Blaine and Zeke's helms. "It's good to see you."<p>

"It's good to see you guys." Blaine said, balancing the hammer as the Prophet looked mere inches from a coronary. He turned to the group, and noticed something. "Sam," he said, "Why do I count eight of us?"

"Hey Blaine," the towering, green-armored soldier said. Blaine recognized him immediately.

"Magnus!" he shouted. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Magnus was alive.

"Magnus!" Zeke shouted. The difference was, his was not a shout of awe, but one of hostility. "What the Hell are you doing here?"

"He's here to help us out." Samuel said. "Now play nice. We're all glad to see you in one piece--"

"Even if you are being a jerk," Victoria finished.

"Personally," Zeke growled, "I was expecting some kind of sad attempt at a rescue. I'm disappointed. We would've beaten you here that way." Blaine couldn't help but noticeâ€|he sounded winded.

"You okay, smart-ass?" he asked. "You sound beat."

"I'm fine." The black-armored Spartan snapped.

Blaine was about to answer when the door between the one he'd come through and the one directly behind the Prophet slid open. Before he could even discern what was going on, ten Hunters and dozens of Jackals filed into the room.

The white-armored Spartan considered backing up, but decided against it.

"Ah," Mercy said, suddenly a little more confident. "Now things should turn around nicely." And then, as if his words had summoned them, aliens of all kinds began to pour from the surrounding doors until even Blaine was forced to ease back toward the group.

"We could be in for a problem." Blaine said, readying the Gravity Hammer. Jason began to laugh.

"Yeah right," he said. "You haven't seen what Magnus can do yet."

"Oh yeah?" Blaine asked, intrigued. "Well then-" He stopped suddenly, when he heard something above him. Blaine looked up to see the giant balcony overlooking the room, and saw more Covenant than he'd bargained for.

"That's a lot of Brutes." Landon said. Blaine saw something else too.

"Oh, shit." He said, watching the dozens of Drones that had started to buzz around at the top of the room. They flew for several seconds before attaching themselves to the ceiling and simply glaring down at the Spartans.

"Well," Mercy said, and the door behind him opened. "It would appear that my presence here is no longer required." After a pause, he shouted, "kill them all!"

And Hell broke loose.

\* \* \*

><p>The Prophet took off immediately, soaring out of the room in his floating throne and flying down the hallway opposite the one the Spartans had come through.<p>

And Samuel was right behind him, even as every soldier in the room began to throw grenades and fire their weapons.

"I'll catch him!" He shouted, pushing the first three Brutes in front of him out of his way like they were nothing. "Can you guys manage here?"

"We're fine!" Stephanie shouted, dodging a grenade from a Brute Shot.

"Go get him, Goliath!" Landon added, using his portable shield to take a shot from one of the Hunters.

As Samuel ran through the room, tossing anything out of the way that tried to stop him, Zeke could only watch, gritting his teeth. Demon had been right: the pain had gotten worse. However, there was one insignificant, irritating little difference: it had taken all of forty minutes before he was working just to function properly.

\_Damned AI,\_ he thought as he watched Samuel run after the Prophet, into the hall. As he did it, a dozen Brutes turned to give chase.

"We can't let them catch Sam!" Stephanie said, her voice echoing in the helm of every Spartan. Zeke watched her turn to Blaine. "Follow my lead." She said.

"What?" He asked. "Why?"

Without a word, she turned to Landon and grabbed his wrists. She turned toward the door that Samuel had gone through and threw the other Spartan at the wall above it. Blaine gripped Jason's wrists a split-second later and followed suit. Even Ezekiel couldn't suppress a grin.

The two Spartans flew through the air like a pair of rockets and hit the wall feet-first. Their biomechanical legs braced, and they dropped with a dull 'thud' to the floor belowâ€|

â€|right between the Covenant soldiers and the door.

They activated their shields simultaneously. "Sorry guys," Landon said, "there's a private party goin' on back there."

Jason stepped forward. "You can just think of us as the bouncers."

Zeke rolled his eyes, looking up at the balcony. He grabbed the portable Gravity Lift that he'd taken from the cache and threw it onto the ground, activating it.

"Comin', Vic?" he asked, and jumped in. The altered gravity threw him high into the air, and as he surpassed the Brutes in height, he used this forward-momentum to flip over their heads and land next to the door at the far end of the balcony.

Instinctively, each and every one of them turned to face him, even as Victoria flew into the air and landed behind them, on the edge of the balcony, in almost complete silence.

"Oh," Zeke said with a laugh as he tried to catch his breath, "it's not me you should be worrying about." The Energy Sword in Victoria's hand flashed to life and a few of the Brutes caught on. "It's her."

\* \* \*

><p>"Would someone please deal with the Drones?" Blaine shouted, unloading a pair of rockets into the group of Hunters before him, all the while on the move in a mad attempt to dodge the raining Hell that the Covenant flyers were providing.<p>

"What do you think I'm trying to do?" Stephanie answered. At that moment, four shots roared from the cannon on her shoulder, and dozens of the alien insects were engulfed in the ensuing blaze. "How's that?"

"Better," Blaine said bitterly. He reloaded the Rocket Launcher as half-a-dozen Hunters formed a semi-circle and began lumbering toward him.

"You want some help?" Magnus' voice echoed in his head. Blaine rolled his eyes.

"I know how to deal with Hunters." He said. With that, he attached the Rocket Launcher to his back and brought the Gravity Hammer to bear.

Before he could use it, however, four of the alien tanks charged their mounted Fuel Rod Cannons and unleashed every ounce of available plasma they could muster. Blaine was instantly put on the defensive, running around to the right side of the group, toward one of the ones that wasn't firing at him yet. Things were going from bad to worse.

\* \* \*

><p>"Demon!" another Brute Major shouted as Samuel passed it by. It was strange, he thought, how it seemed like they all just expected him to slow down and wage war with themâ€|just because they shouted as he sped by. This was the fourth so far.<p>

"Surrender, Demon!" Mercy shouted, still dozens of feet away. He was turned around so that he could face Samuel, but his throne was still floating down the hall, away from the Spartan, at high speeds. "And your death can be quick!"

"Pass!" Sam shouted. "I'm a much bigger fan of the  
"I-catch-you-and-kill-you" idea!"

As he said it, a door on the right side of the hall slid open, and a pair of Hunters charged into the corridor. They turned to face Samuel.

"Great," he muttered, raising the Shotguns and firing on their 'faces.' It wasn't enough to truly harm the creatures, but it got them to raise the metal mounts on their arms up and away from the Spartan long enough for him to charge between them, pushing them both to the side as he did so.

The Prophet's throne soared away from the Spartan, almost to the wall at the end of the passage. Then Mercy turned a hard right, into another door. Samuel saw the alien scowl, shaking its head.

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel ducked low, dodging another grenade that flew by his head. He couldn't stop himself: one hand clutched the armor covering his chest before he started to come up from it.<p>

\_Fool!\_ He thought to himself, instantly removing his hand. \_You can't let them see that you're injured. For Heaven's sake, that's amateur!\_

The Spartan rose up and re-activated the Energy Sword in his hand. He swayed to the left to dodge another blast from the Brute Shot before him, then charged. Unfortunately, the four Brutes in front of him weren't about to let up. Each of the aliens unleashed whatever they had left in their Brute Shots and Spikers, and the black-armored Spartan was eventually forced back to the ground to dodge them all.

"Damn it!" he cursed, rising up as he tried to catch his breath again. Everything Demon had mentioned had either happened, or was in the process of doing so. Zeke could barely breathe. His reflexes " his reaction time " were shot. His whole body hurt.

He squared off with the aliens before him as they finished reloading their weapons, and he suddenly wondered where Victoria was and what she was doing.

And if she was doing any better than he was.

"Iâ€|" he muttered, "I'm not done yet." He shook his head. "I've got t-"

BOOM!

A shot impacted with his back and exploded, splashing over his shields and sending him stumbling forward. He whipped around, ready for war, when another shot rang out as one of the four Brutes he'd just been watching fired on him.

Normally, Zeke would've smiled at the attack. Normally, he'd have simply ducked down, spun around to face group with his rifle raised, and decapitated all four of the damned creatures.



Normally, however, Ezekiel Veron wouldn't be working just to breathe.

The shot connected with his back, and he stumbled again, just in time to be hit with another from behind, and for the Brute that had fired the very first shot, now in front of him, to fire as well.

That was all he could take.

The last shot connected with his chest, and it sent excruciating shockwaves through the Spartan's body. His chest felt like it was on fire and breathing was suddenly an agonizing ordeal. Zeke clutched his chest and fell backwards, onto the floor, his breath still coming in short, ragged gasps.

He gritted his teeth and forced himself to stand. First he was on one knee, then on both before literally yelling into his visor to get his body to get up. However, the second he thought he was stably standing, his knees gave out. They shook for a minute, and then he fell straight back down, crashing to the ground.

"Demon," he gasped, "Stim-Pack, right now."

\* \* \*

><p>Victoria wasn't sure why she reacted the way she did, but when she saw the black-armored soldier hit the ground for a second time, she was sure he was dying. There was no other reason that Ezekiel would fall over of his own accord. It just didn't happen.<p>

Without a second's hesitation, she took a Plasma Grenade from her suit, primed it, and stuck it to one of the three Brutes she was currently in combat with. As she did so, she ducked low and jabbed both the others in the knees, causing them to roar but, more importantly, disabling them from going anywhere.

"Zeke!" she said, turning and sprinting for her teammate as the Brute she'd stuck detonated in the middle of its packmates. Even as she ran, she was more than vaguely aware of a group of Brutes watching her—no doubt the same ones that had targeted Ezekiel. But Vic ignored them; they weren't shooting at her yet. She got up to him, and heard what sounded like arguing.

"Help me," he gasped, turning his head to her. "I need a Stim-Pack."

"What for?" she asked, genuinely puzzled. Stim-Packs were mostly just super-caFFEinated shots or pills.

"Not a UNSC Stim-Pack," he said, the words dripping from his mouth like she'd just asked the most ridiculous question in history. Breathing incredibly hard, he finished, "one of mine!"

At that second, a piece of armor surround his ribcage slid slightly, ejecting a small syringe.

"What is this?" She asked, picking it up even as the group of Brutes raised their weapons.

"Justâ€¦!" he started, still gasping, "just shoot me with it!"

"What's wrong with you?" she asked. "You're barely breathing."

"Demon says he's got a punctured lung," Gael said from somewhere inside her head. "He also says not to give him the shot."

"Do it!" the other Spartan snapped, and his snaps on his helmet unfastened as he removed it. Victoria's eyes went wide for a split-second. For once, he lacked any sort of shielding for his eyes. It was strange.

"Uh," she started, pondering whether or not she actually wanted to inject him.

Before she could come to a decision, his eyes widened and he pulled a Bubble Shield device from his armor and tossed it onto the ground beside them, just as a pair of shots rang out behind her. Victoria turned to see the other Brutes walking slowly â€" painfully slowly â€" toward them.

"What the Hell are you waiting for?" he growled. "Come on!"

"Don't do it." Suddenly, Gael was interrupting him. "It's not safe."

Victoria had no idea what to do. Her teammate â€" another Spartan â€" was asking her to help him, but the AI that she could trust her own life with was demanding that she refrain, for no other reason than the safety of the other soldier. How was she supposed to know what was best? She didn't even know the extent of the damage.

"Please," Zeke said, panting. Her head snapped up. She couldn't have heard what she thought she had. "Please," he repeated. "Give me the shot."

\* \* \*

><p>"This is psychotic!" Landon shouted, blocking another shot with his mounted shield, then blasting one unlucky Brute in the face with his Shotgun. "I mean, seriously! How many of you bastards are there?"<p>

"We can't keep this up much longer!" Stephanie shouted, her voice echoing in his head what seemed like a dozen times. "We don't have the firepower!"

"Thanks for that!" he shouted back. "How about we just call you Captain Obvious from now on?" He pulled his whole body back before raising his left arm â€" shield up â€" and smashing it into the nearest Brute with all the effort he could muster. The creature went stumbling back, tripping over a pair of its packmates.

Out of the corner of his eye, Landon could make out the rest of the Spartans on ground-level, trying to fight off whatever the aliens could throw at them. Blaine and Stephanie â€" their ammo for the heavy weapons long-gone â€" were throwing their own bodies at the four Hunters still in the room, trying to avoid the streams of green

plasma and still do more than a negligible amount of damage to the veritable tanks.

Magnus was alone and easily holding his own with more than a dozen Brutes. With a pair of Shotguns and the fact that he towered more than three feet above the Spiker-wielding aliens, it was like the Covenant had brought a knife to a gunfight.

Jason was mere feet away, somehow using a Beam Rifle now that his Shotgun was empty. Landon couldn't fathom how he could maintain the focus to ram Brutes with his shield, pull back and turn it off, and then pull off a pair of headshots in less than a full second before repeating the process.

"Kill them all!" a deep, alien voice suddenly rang out from a door off to Landon's right. He risked a glance to see two-dozen Brutes " each of them Major-rank or higher " piling into the room.

"Look out!" Stephanie yelled as at least seven of them unloaded with their Fuel Rod Cannons, firing in all directions at the Spartans.

Landon put both his shields between himself and the blasts and could only watch and pray that they would hold. When, by some miracle, they did, the leading Brute Chieftain roared again.

"For the Hierarch!" it shouted, raising its Gravity Hammer into the air. "We will kill the Demons! Bring me their hides!" And, upon his word, every other Brute charged forward, until the leading Chieftain was completely hidden by their bodies.

"Fall back!" Magnus yelled, firing several shots from his own Fuel Rod Cannons into the oncoming horde. "Fall back!"

Landon glanced backwards, down the tunnel Samuel had gone through. They'd sworn to keep the Brutes from following him—and he wasn't back yet.

"We can't!" Blaine's voice suddenly echoed around the room. "We're not backing down!" Landon saw the white-armored Spartan drop his Gravity Hammer " now empty " to the ground, and charge head-on into the small army of Brutes before him.

"Blaine!" Magnus roared, but he was unable to stop him. Landon watched as his fellow Spartan vanished into the group of aliens after throwing more than a half-dozen of them to the floor.

Just as he was looking around, trying to find more stable orders, Landon saw three Brute bodies fly into the air from the center of the pack. They soared in different directions, but each one flew in a straight line from the middle of the group. One of them crashed to the ground mere feet from Landon, and he couldn't stop himself from smiling.

It was the same Chieftain that had been giving orders a moment before—and it was missing its hammer.

Landon looked up in time to see the group turning inwards on itself, trying to exterminate the Spartan within. But it was no use: Blaine had gotten his hands on a Gravity Hammer and slammed his feet to the

floor. Things were about to get ugly.

\* \* \*

><p>The actions of their teammate had put renewed vigor into the rest of Zulu Company on the ground floor; Magnus could see it. It was incredible the difference the success of one suicidal move could make. And, for some reason, the "loner" Spartan was lost in it.<p>

"Blaine!" Stephanie shouted, and Magnus' mind snapped back. The same Brutes that had just launched an all-out assault on Zulu Company with their Fuel Rod Cannon's had turned their sights on Blaine, and they seemed indifferent to the fact that there were still Brutes near him.

Without a second's notice, they fired.

To Magnus, the whole thing seemed to happen in slow motion. He watched as literally dozens of Fuel Rods flew from the mouths of the cannons and seared the air around them as they streamed toward the white-armored Spartan. Just before the first of the blasts connected, Magnus saw Blaine pull a small, shining gold object from his armor. He raised it all the way to his chest before he was suddenly swallowed in a glowing green haze. The very air around him seemed to crack and burn as each and every Fuel Rod found its mark, detonated and setting both him and the nearby Brutes ablaze.

Finally, after a few seconds that, to the Spartans, had felt like hours, the smoke cleared. In the center of burning area, a half-dozen Brutes were either dying or dead on the floor. Blaine, however was not just intact; he was glowing, surrounded in glistening white bands.

The surviving Brutes never had a chance. Blaine charged the first one and buried his fist in the alien's gut, doubling it over. With its face looking to the ground, he clasped his hands above his head and sent them crashing down on its skull. Even as he did it, he primed a Spike Grenade and flung it at the nearest creature he could find, letting it sink itself into the Brute's chest before detonating in a mass of superheated spikes.

Another of the beasts tried to attack him from behind. It hit him once with its Fuel Rod Cannon, bashing it into the Spartan's back. Then, when that didn't work, it lashed out with its hand.

Blaine would have none of it. He dodged slightly to the left, gripped the alien's arm at the wrist and flipped it up and over his head, sending it smashing into the ground at his feet, looking up at him.

Without a second's pause, he raised one foot and brought it down on the Brute's helmeted-skull.

"I'm done playin' games!" Blaine growled, now unlatching the new Gravity Hammer from his armor and bringing it to bear. He turned to face the Fuel Rod-wielding Chieftains. "Let the ass-kicking commence!"

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel rounded another corner, still trying desperately to catch the Covenant Prophet. Surely the hierarch had missed its turn somewhere, because they'd been playing this game of cat-and-mouse for more than fifteen minutes.<p>

"How determined are you, Demon?" Mercy shouted back to him. "How far are you willing to go?"

"To the Gates of Hell, if that's what it takes!" Samuel roared back, pushing himself even harder to increase his pace.

Before he could gain any ground, however, a green-lit door in the hall opened, and yet another pair of Hunters emerged, moving to block his way.

Samuel gritted his teeth and pulled his Shotguns to bear. "Enough," he growled. "I've had enough!" He mimicked his actions from before, blasting both creatures in what would be their faces, if they had had any. Next he re-attached the guns, primed a pair of Spike Grenades and stuck them inside the alien tanks.

Both of them detonated in a haze of spikes, but one of them â€" apparently the more resilient of the two â€" swung its great, armored limb and pinned the Spartan to one wall. Samuel felt the bones in his right ankle crack and break as his leg was still twisted when the alien hit him. He could see that the creature was bleeding profusely, but it didn't seem to care; it just kept pushing him harder.

Samuel glanced down the hall to see that the Prophet had stopped and was watching his painful ordeal with noticeable pleasure.

\_Come on,\_ he told himself, trying to push the Hunter away from him, but to no avail. \_I have to finish this.\_

Taking a deep breath, the brown-clad Spartan put his arms straight out to his sides, forming a "T," and then clapped them together on what remained of the Hunter's "head," smashing the armor inward and killing what few Lekgolo remained. The monster took a step backwards, roaring in rage, but Samuel wasn't going to wait for it to take another shot: he primed a Fragmentation Grenade and stuck it into the already-open abdomen, then ran after the Prophet once more.

Instantly, Mercy was flying again at full speed, but Samuel lacked the ability to keep up. His ankle was twisted in what felt like a hundred places, and the pain simply to walk on it was enough to embitter him even further.

"What's the matter?" Mercy asked, stopping the throne and even floating toward the Spartan. "Are you injured, Demon?" At that, a small orb at the front of the throne began to glow, and Samuel was thrown back into the wall as the Gravity Cannon let loose.

The Prophet didn't stop, though. He came towards Samuel, and the brown-armored Spartan began to walk toward him, working for every single step against the cannon. It was doing little to his shields, surprisingly, but he knew that another shot into the wall would do a number on him.

"You will die here, human!" Mercy shouted. "And I will make sure that your whole planet follow-"

Samuel lunged forward and reached out with his right hand, reaching through the beam and pushing his hand through the front of the throne. He gripped the Gravity Cannon from the back, and ripped it from the chair, orb and all.

And Mercy lost his mind.

"No!" he shouted, now literally trembling inside the throne. Normally, the careful Prophet would never have made such a mistake as to get close to his opponent, but the circumstances had him flustered. Having lost Regret and "presumably" Truth as well, he was desperate to finish the war.

Perhaps even a little too desperate.

The Prophet cried out in fear and took off down the hallway as fast as he could go in his mobile throne, turned away from Samuel and refusing to look back.

"I'm sick and tired of chasing you and your floating chair!" Samuel yelled. He took the weapon from his back and rested it on his shoulder, aiming and pulling the trigger. A light red dot appeared on the throne.

Three seconds later, the Spartan Laser tore through the narrow hall and devoured the bottom half of the throne, causing it to fall from the air and crash into the titanium floor. It rolled half-way around before stopping, coming to rest against a side-wall.

Samuel walked calmly up to the Prophet, who was looking up at him with terrified eyes. The Spartan could see that the laser had done more than destroy the throne: it had cut Mercy off at the waist.

"Please," the Prophet pleaded, "we never meant any harm. We only did what the gods instructed!"

Samuel was indifferent. "I don't know what your sorry excuses for gods told you, but I know that mine has put me here to put an end to this," he paused, priming the last Plasma Grenade he had, then added, "once and for all!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Shot"right now please!" Zeke snarled as Victoria opened fire on a group of Brutes on the balcony. The Bubble Shield had long since dissipated, and she hadn't been given a chance to inject him afterwards. Aiming for his neck, she needed time and concentration.<p>

"Which is hard to come by when there are grenades and superheated spikes soaring through the air.

"In a minute!" she snapped back. "I'm doing the best I can."

When she'd killed two of the Brutes and stripped the armor from two more, she came back over to him and he tilted his head to show his

neck.

"Now," she said nervously, "are you sure you want this? I haven't done this before. I mean, we had a little bit of training, but never the real-"

"Just do it!" he snapped.

A second later, he felt a pain in his neck as she injected the syringe. The combination of adrenaline and a half-a-dozen other drugs immediately started coursing through his veins. In mere moments, he felt his breathing being accelerated and the pain in his chest began to dull.

\_It won't last,\_ he thought bitterly. He'd used the adrenaline before. It was a temporary fix to a permanent problem, much like Demon's use of biofoam.

"You okay?" Victoria asked. He grinned, reaching for his helmet. A second later, it was back on his head, latched into place.

"Perfect," he said, pulling his legs up as he lie on his back. Then he thrust them forward, essentially "jumping" up from the floor, more for the effect than anything. He needed the Brutes to believe that he was back in full force.

"You're a fool," Demon said from somewhere in his mind. "That's only going to speed up the process of-"

"No one rattled your cage." Zeke snapped, activating his Energy Sword and staring at the last few Brutes on the balcony. He and Victoria were mere feet from the only door, and the five aliens were standing only a few meters from the edge.

It was going to be easier than he thought.

"Just take it easy," Victoria said carefully. "You can't just go run-"

He darted toward the edge, running at about half of his normal speed, but careful enough to watch for any oncoming blasts from the Brutes. Before he'd gotten even ten steps, however, the female was beside him and passing him.

"You're not about to go and get yourself killed." She said, sprinting leaps and bounds ahead of him. Before he could even contemplate hitting the Brutes, she'd come to the middle one, ducked a shot from its Brute Shot and kicked it in the ribcage hard enough to launch it over the edge.

She primed a Plasma Grenade and ran toward another Brute. Thinking it was about to be stuck, the creature ducked, but she simply lobbed it over the alien's head, easily sticking the soldier behind it. Then, before the first Brute could stand back up, she turned her leg sideways and impaled it in the knee with one of her mounted blades.

The creature stumbled backwards until it too fell over the side of the balcony.

"I didn't have you give me that so you could do all the work!" Zeke growled, running as fast as he could to meet the last two Brutes, both of which were wielding nothing but low-class Spikers.

The Spartan primed a Frag Grenade and threw it at the feet of the two aliens, letting it donate mere inches in front of them. With shrapnel and smoke in the air, he jumped forward, coming down directly between the two now-unarmored Brutes and impaling the one on his left with the Energy Sword.

As it roared and stumbled back, the other took a swing with the blade mounted on its Spiker, but it caught the empty air. Zeke was grinning, about to impale the second beast, when a burst of gunfire erupted from behind it, and the Brute dropped to the ground, dead.

Victoria was behind it, armed with a Battle Rifle.

"Damn it!" Zeke cursed. "What the Hell are you doing?"

"Your lung is punctured. How about you ju-" She stopped, looking slightly above him.

"What?" he asked. "What are you-" He turned around, looking to the ceiling, and stopped cold.

Above them, coming from what looked like an overly-large vent only a few feet from the ceiling, was " what looked to Zeke like " a giant, insect-like appendage, ending in a sharp point. It was ghostly-white at all but the tip, and easily fourteen feet long when the body began to emerge.

"What's that?" Victoria asked, her voice laced with a combination of awe and worry.

"Ah, Hell," Zeke moaned. "You've gotta be kiddin' me. You gotta be freakin' kidding me."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Alright! Do me a favor...tell me if you're still with me, lol. I'll try to get the next one done and finish this fight as soon as I can. In the meantime...you get to wonder what the Covenant have in their vents. lol. Talk to you all later. And remember, if you need to e-mail me for any reason...mine will be listed in my Profile shortly.<strong>

#### 48. Chapter 47: Something New

\*\*Author's Notes: Alright...here we go! The dramatic battle I've been trying to write for so long, lol. But, first, Reviews!\*\*

\*\*Reviews:\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey! Thanks for your review, and I hope you didn't feel like you had to wait too long, lol.\*\*



**\*\*Benaia Dre:** Yeah, I had to do kind of a cliff-hanger. My bad, lol. And no, school's not too bad. It takes some getting used to...I'll give it that. Thanks for reviewing for me, I know you're busy a lot. Hope all's well...been busy the last few times we tried to chat.\*\*

**\*\*1 way ticket:** Hey you. :) Yeah yeah yeah...Zeke and the injection...he's gonna have his fair share this time around. Still trying to figure out why you enjoy that so much... ;) Thanks for reading and reviewing.\*\*

**\*\*AosUnderSol:** Yeah, Blaine's awesome...everyone seems to have a thing for the hammer, lol. And no, I'm not offing Zeke...maybe later. ;) And Stephanie will get her shot this time around too. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*Samson00:** Hey, thanks for reading most of this for me...sorry I couldn't get it finished before you had to take off. Hope you like the conclusion, and I hope that Stats doesn't kill you. ;) Adios man, thanks again for your help.\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Hi! First of all...what makes a good FanFic...the heck if I know. Honestly, I critique this story all the time and say how stupid I was for certain parts. I could try to give you a few little things, but I wouldn't dare try to tell anyone else how to do it. If you really would like for me to give any advice, you're more than welcome to e-mail me, and I'll do my best. Also, in regards to the last chapter...it seems a lot of people liked the Brave Grunt. I'm happy that got the reaction it did. And thanks for your compliment on the fight-scene too!\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** You like this side of him, huh? I'm not sure he does, lol. ;) Hope you like this one too! Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*pottervspendragon:** lol, thank you very much for the compliment. As for the possible "Drone Queen," well...you'll just have to read and find out.\*\*

**\*\*Redflame101:** lol, you'll get no argument from me. ;) \*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** Hey, thanks very much for your compliments...I'm glad you like the chapter so much. And the battle's not over yet. ;) Plus, I did feel like I was underplaying Sam some (sorry Sam don't ask if you don't know, lol). But, it was circumstances...and I'm beyond that now. I really hope you like this next one as much as you did 46! Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*Jimbo1Kenobee:** lol, glad to hear it! Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*Lecter42:** haha, glad you like the hammer as much as everyone else seems to. Plus...yeah...Zeke...Vic...kind of a bitter rivalry. That might calm down ever-so-slightly later... \*\*

**\*\*...nah.\*\***

**\*\*lol.** And yes, I will be bringing the Flood in soon. That's actually my last segment (oh no! Spoiler! ...yeah right. If you didn't expect me to bring in the Flood...well...). I'm hoping it will be my best

segment. :) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: lol, thanks a lot for all the compliments! I'm flattered, lol. And yeah...Zeke said "please." I don't think a couple of other readers could believe it either. And the Grunt...well, yeah. He had his moment...and it ended, lol. And Mercy bit the dust, finally. 'Bout time, right? Shouldn't face down Sam at point-blank, if you like your life-expectancy to remain fairly high. hehehe. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*ALRIGHT, with that out of the way, the next chapter! Oh, and before I forget, I would BEG you all to keep an open mind, as I will be introducing a couple of "new" Covies to the mix. One of them (the one I will put the most focus on), will have a large description (you'll know it when you see it). If you STILL can't get an idea of what it looks like, scroll to the bottom, where I have a link to the picture I used to describe them. PLEASE, don't do that before reading. It's no fun if you spoil it, lol.\*\*

\*\*Alright! Chapter 47...Something New. \*\*

\* \* \*

><p><p>

â€" \*\*Something New â€"\*\*

\*\*0100 Hours - February 2, 2553\*\*

\*\*Aboard the Covenant Assault Carrier - Outside Earth's Orbit\*\*

"Would someone care to tell me what the Hell that is?" Ezekiel asked, looking up at the strange, pale-white insect that was crawling out of the vent. Victoria just shook her head.

It had a small, vague resemblance to the Drones that had appeared earlier, but it was obvious that â€" whatever it was â€" it wasn't one of the little, green fliers that the Spartans had grown accustomed to. For one thing, each of its six legs was better than ten feet long, and ended in a single razor-sharp point. It lacked wings, but seemed to possess a shell similar to the hard carapace that the Drones all had.

"I'm not sure," Gael said, her voice echoing in the Spartan's mind, "but I think that might be a type of Drone, albeit quite a bit different than the ones we're used to."

"You mean, like the Drone Queen?" Vic asked, still watching wearily as the enormous insect literally crawled across the ceiling.

"I don't think so." Gael said. "From what we've gathered on Covenant intelligence, the Drones no longer have a Queen to report to, because of the Prophets. However, we once discovered data relating to groups of large, wingless Drones that were described as 'Workers', and their original role was to support the Queen."

"Soâ€|you think these are Worker Drones?" The idea seemed plausible, but Victoria still wasn't convinced. She turned to ask Ezekiel-

He was at the door to the balcony, pulling his hand back from a console on the wall.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"Demon's gonna tell me what the Hell is going on." He snapped. She could hear in his voice that his breathing was getting worse again, but decided against mentioning it.

BOOM!

Something slammed into the ground somewhere in the room, and both Spartans ran to the edge of the balcony to see the damage. Victoria knew long before they got there what had fallen, since the Worker Drone was no longer on the ceiling.

They reached the edge and peered over. Luckily, no one had been standing in the way when the giant insect crashed into the floor. Now, however, it was standing on six powerful legs, raising itself so that the top of its back was nearly twenty-feet high.

"That's a big-ass bug," Blaine's voice echoed in Victoria's ears. She nodded subconsciously, watching. The two-dozen Covenant that were already on the ground-floor had stopped cold when the giant Drone fell and had yet to return to their assault.

"What the Hell-" Zeke started, standing beside her. She glanced toward him to see that his head was turned to the ceiling. Reluctantly, she risked a nervous glance-

And she saw two more of the creatures, one of them crawling from the ventâ€|another already preparing to drop.

"Look out!" she shouted as loudly as she could. Even as she did it, the giant alien let go of the ceiling and dropped like a ten-ton rock straight to the bottom.

Thankfully, the only living beings still in the way were a pair of particularly unlucky Jackals.

CRACK!

The unexpected sound of the rifle was so close to her head that it was almost deafening as Ezekiel fired a single round at the creature still trying to crawl out of the vent. The shot tore through the insect's head and neck, and it stopped moving entirely, three-quarters of its huge form still hidden in the wall.

"For such big bastards," the black-armored Spartan said, "they're not very resilient." He paused. "Not that I'm complaining."

CRACK!

The second shot was aimed at another of the creatures that appeared to be trying to crawl passed the dead body still lodged inside the vent. And again, one was all it took.

"Not bad," Victoria said, nodding approvingly. "Especially with your lun-"

"Don't patronize me." He snapped. "A punctured lung doesn't mean a damned thing. Hell, I'm not breathing when I shoot half the time anyway."

Victoria turned away from him, silently blaming his bad mood on the pain that he had to be in. She glanced toward the ground in time to watch Blaine tear into a group of Brute Majors with his Gravity Hammer. But even as he did, still more of them continued to pour in from the doorways.

"I'm going down there." She said finally, turning to Ezekiel. She reached out her right hand. "Give me your sword."

"What?" He shouted bitterly. "You've lost your mind."

She shook her head. "You can't use it anyway." He started to interrupt, but she cut him off. "Like it or not, you're slow, you're inefficient, and you're going to get yourself killed."

For several seconds, he just stood there, looking at her. He didn't even move when Victoria risked a glance above them and saw two more of the giant Drones crawling from the vent.

"Please," she said, reaching her hand out. "Please just give me the sword." She paused, then added with a smile, "it's not worth your life."

Reluctantly, he took the sword from his armor and â€" very angrily â€" smacked it down into her open hand. "There," he said, "happy now?"

"Almost," she answered. She reached down with her free hand and took the equipment from her thigh that she'd pulled from the body of a Brute Chieftain. Victoria stared at the golden, glowing device and handed it to Ezekiel.

"I don't need this." He growled. "After all," he added bitterly, "I obviously won't be the one doing the fighting."

"Keep it," Victoria said. Before he could answer, she turned around and ran toward the edge of the balcony.

And then, almost as if it had been waiting, one of the two Drones crawling across the ceiling dropped. Victoria leapt off the edge and caught it on the way down, thrusting both of her Energy Swords out and ripping into the alien's head and neck. As she did so, the female Spartan gripped one of its front legs with her own and flipped herself so that she was standing on top of the Worker Drone.

A second later, when the floor below was painfully close, she jumped nimbly off of the alien, landing almost silently on the ground as it literally crashed into the titanium floor of the room.

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine wasn't sure what to make of these new creatures, but he learned early on that their exoskeletons weren't half as tough as they looked. Between Zeke's few rounds and a couple of Plasma Grenades to the head, three of them had already bit the dust.<p>

The biomechanical Spartan only glanced over as Victoria touched down, one of the giant insects smashing down only mere meters away. He was used to the idea that both she and Zeke took pleasure in making an entrance.

Though, admittedly, Zeke took more pleasure in it than anyone.

Three more of the Drones crawled across the ceiling now, and Blaine had seen four open vents for the monstrosities to come from.

CRACK!

One of them suddenly lost its grip on the ceiling and fell straight down to the bottom of the room—landing less than ten feet from where Blaine was standing.

"Damn it, Zeke!" He shouted into his helmet. "Watch where you drop 'em!"

"Watch where you're standing," the other Spartan answered coolly.

CRACK!

Another one fell. That would've left only one, but two more had already taken the place of the ones Zeke shot. Blaine braced himself as all three of them simultaneously dropped. They righted themselves in the air and crashed into the floor on all sides of him.

"I'm not sure this is fair," Landon said as sent one of his mounted shields crashing into the face of a nearby Brute. "I mean, when have we ever gotten tank-sized reinforcements?"

"You be sure to take that up with Command." Stephanie answered.

Blaine ignored them. Between the three creatures that had landed all around him, the two-dozen Brutes that were still scattered around the room, and the occasional Grunt or Jackal, they still had their work cut out for them.

The only plus was that the Hunters had stopped appearing for some time.

\_Of course,\_ Blaine thought, \_that's probably only because all the damned doors are locked.\_ He glanced around, double-checking himself. Sure enough, seven of the eight doors were glowing bright red. The last one was the one that Samuel had gone through, and no one dared follow against his orders.

Suddenly, the nearest Worker Drone lifted its two enormous front legs and brought them down on Blaine. He barely dove out of the way as they stabbed the metal where he had just been standing.

The white-armored Spartan whistled lowly, looking up at the massive limbs. Each was easily the width of a small tree at its base, and they narrowed into a sharp point at the tip, capable of skewering—what looked like just about anything.

Before Blaine could even try to get to his Rocket Launcher, the alien was at it again. It brought up its two giant limbs and sent them down, straight toward the Spartan-

Blaine caught them in his hands, struggling but effectively holding them at arms' length above his head. The Drone let out a scream that was insanely high-pitched for something its size.

"Uh-oh," Blaine mocked, "now what're you gonna do?"

As if in response, the creature raised the limbs, trying to throw the Spartan into the air. Blaine only grinned. He held on for a split-second and used his arms to throw himself up and over the alien, landing securely on its giant back. Quickly, he got up and reached for its neck, wrapping one arm around it and letting a scream resound from its ugly mouth.

"Now," he said, priming a Plasma Grenade, "you're toast." As it screamed, he threw the grenade into its open mouth, then used both hands to clamp it shut. A muffled explosion shook the creature's entire body and its eyes looked like they were about to bounce from the sockets—and then it fell.

Blaine walked off the insect's carcass casually, looking around the room as the others dealt with the beasts as well. He shrugged. "They're not so tough."

\* \* \*

><p>"Holy Hell!" Landon shouted, thrusting his arm-shield into what felt like the ten-<strong>thousandth<strong> Brute. "You know, this whole 'let's try the same thing again even though we keep getting our asses kicked' idea and expecting different results" isn't that, like, the definition of insanity?"

The Brute stumbled backwards into another of its packmates, growling bitterly as it regained its balance—just in time to meet a blast from the Spartan's Shotgun, straight to the face.

"This is freakin' madness." Jason said beside him, shaking his head as another of the locked doors began to glow green. It opened long enough for another wave of Brutes to pour inside, then closed and locked once more. "We need to think of a plan."

"You've got my vote." Landon said, taking a deep breath as he readied for the next assault. He was only slightly envious of the others, because they were fighting against these new, gigantic Drones—

But then, he suddenly remembered that he lacked any kind of heavy weapons, and the envy quickly passed.

CRACK!

Zeke fired again, and another of the creatures gripping the ceiling dropped prematurely, crashing into the floor. Landon glanced upwards as the Brutes began to advance on the other Spartans.

CRACK!

One more of the giant insects fell. The Brutes barely had a chance to

glance at the ceiling before-

BOOM!

It landed, smashing the smaller aliens into the floor. Eight of them were buried beneath its weight, permanently incapacitated. Landon smiled.

"Keep 'em coming!" he shouted. "Just like that!"

Still grinning, he looked over to see how the rest of the Spartans were fairing against the horde of aliens still in the room.

Stephanie was mostly dealing with the Brutes, blasting the Hell out of each and every one she could find with a combination of her Fuel Rod Gun and two Brute Maulers. Oddly, the larger insects appeared almost to be ignoring herâ€|probably because they were too focused on Magnus.

The giant super-Spartan was backed almost up into a corner, with three of them bearing down on him, stabbing and stomping at the ground with their huge legs. When he'd backed as far as he could, the green-armored soldier raised both hands and, at that moment, opened the floodgates. Hell rained down on the three enormous insects as he unloaded a dozen shots from his Fuel Rod Cannons, each and every one detonating in their ugly faces.

And then, as usual, his enemies fellâ€|all of them. They just collapsed before him.

It was just plain sick.

"That's bull!" Landon yelled angrily, but at no one in particular. He shook his head. "Where the Hell is my built-in cannon?"

"You don't get one." Jason said, laughing. "You get built-in shields."

Landon scoffed. "Think about it!" He shouted. "If you have a choice between a damned shield and the big, kick-ass cannon from Hell, which would you take?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't." He answered. "I just said you don't get one."

"Hey!" Blaine shouted, his voice interrupting their conversation. "Less talking, more helping!" He paused, and Landon saw him slam his Gravity Hammer into one of the giant Drones. Then, he finished, "now!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Come on," Samuel whispered, pushing himself to run as fast as he could. His ankle was in complete agony, but he knew that he couldn't pay attention to thatâ€|he had to get back to that room.<p>

He had to get back to the team.

Limping, he was still running at fully twice the speed of a normal

man in tip-top shape. He forced himself to take huge strides, trying to cover all the distance he could before something came out to greet him.

"Demon!"

"Crap," he said. Thankfully, there were only two of them this time. All that stood in his way were two Brute Majors.

"Stop, Demon!"

"Die, Brute!" He answered, raising both Shotguns even with more than twenty feet between him and the two aliens. They both raised Carbines, but Samuel didn't care. He knew who was coming out on top in this match.

Four seconds and three Shotgun-blasts later, he had passed them, and was back on his way. He only made it another forty yards, however, when something new caught his attention. Barely, faintly, he could hear something behind him—footsteps. Something was running.

And it was catching him.

Acting purely on instinct, Samuel spun around and opened fire with both Shotguns.

The creature had been less than a foot behind him. And, from what it looked like, if it had covered that last foot, Samuel wouldn't have even gotten to see it before it slaughtered him.

He just stood there, for several seconds, looking down at the eight-foot-tall, white alien that was staring up at him from the floor with bleak, dead eyes. He'd never seen " or even heard " about something like this before. It was a biped, no doubt, as it had two long, powerful legs. The head was vaguely insectoid—it reminded him of a praying mantis or something...albeit one that had been mutated beyond belief. Rows of sharp teeth lined the inside of its open jaw.

And that wasn't the only thing that reminded him of a mantis. The creature had four arms, and each one ended in a two-foot-long scythe made of some unknown, black-colored alloy. None of the scythes had taken any damage from the twin Shotgun blasts, so they had to be made of something insanely strong.

"My Lord," he said, shaking his head. "What is this?"

\* \* \*

><p>Victoria smiled to herself. Somehow, she and the others had managed to slaughter more than two-dozen of the giant Worker Drones, and their carcasses now littered the floor, hiding fully half the room. Even better, another one hadn't appeared in several minutes, and that meant " hopefully " that the Covenant were reaching the last of their soldiers.<p>

She looked around for more aliens and spotted a pair of Brutes that, if she didn't know better, she'd have assumed were going to try to assault Magnus.



From what Zulu Company had seen, that typically didn't end well for the little guys.

Still, she took the opportunity and activated her twin Energy Swords, dashing toward them. Before the beasts even knew what was going on, she was on them, slicing and tearing their limbs from their bodies, shields or no shields. It didn't matter. With two swords in-hand, she felt more agile, better-armed.

She felt like she was in a league all her own.

As the female Spartan stood there, collecting herself, she heard a door slide open behind her.

It was that very sound that saved her life.

Victoria turned just in time to see the blow coming and threw herself backwards, narrowly dodging the pitch-black scythe that sliced through the air where her neck had just been. She continued jumping nimbly backwards as this new creature continued to charge her, cutting the air with four dangerous limbs—each one ending in a deadly scythe-like appendage.

"What the—" She started, but was interrupted as this new alien leapt into the air with all the intent in the world to come down directly on top of her. She dove to the left and it caught empty space, still slicing with all the terrifying efficiency of some sort of machine.

She rose up, ducked back down, and leapt backwards once more, trying to learn anything she could before this new creature tore her apart.

"What is that thing?" She shouted. Gael answered first.

"I'm not sure," the AI said, "but Demon thinks it's called a Stalker."

And then, Victoria stopped jumping. She raised her arms to chest-height and clenched her fists, the two swords still in-hand. "That's enough!" She said. "I don't care what it is!" The twin blades erupted into life, the shining plasma contained only by a small magnetic field.

The indigo-armored soldier waited for an opportunity, and she found one almost immediately. The Stalker brought one of its arms in from the left, and she raised the sword to meet it. Time seemed to pass in slow motion as she waited for the blade to cut right through the alien's scythe and—

The 'scythe' connected with the sword and Victoria felt her arm being twisted as the force of the blow moved the Energy Sword.

\_That's impossible! \_She thought. \_Whatever that thing is—it's blades—they're tough enough to stand up to pure plasma.\_ It didn't make sense. What kind of material did it have to be made of not to be vulnerable to something like an Energy Sword?

Instantly, the female Spartan was engaged in a deadly dance with this new creature, using both of the blades she was holding, and each of

her four offensive-mounts to the very best of her ability to keep it from tearing her apart.

Finally, she got another opportunity, and she took it. Spinning around to catch two of its arms with only one of her swords, she caught the third with the blade in her other hand—and used the mount on her elbow to slice one of the creature's arms off at the joint, before whatever material made up the 'scythe' began to appear.

Sure enough, it was only skin, bone, and muscle, and the plasma tore through it like a hot knife through butter. The Stalker let out a harsh, high-pitched shriek that ripped through Victoria's ears. Before it could finish it, she took the blade in her hand and sunk it into the alien's neck. It squirmed for only a second before collapsing.

"Oh—" she said, panting. "What—in the world—"

"Victoria!" A voice echoed in her ears. It was Magnus. "Look out!"

She turned around just as the Stalker raised its dangerous limbs and came down—

CRACK!

A single hole penetrated its skull, and the alien hit the floor, dead.

Victoria didn't even look up. She knew. "Thanks," she said.

"Told you to keep your damned Invincibility," Zeke returned. Then, a moment later, she heard him laugh as he added, "my pleasure."

\* \* \*

><p>Zeke scowled as he looked through the scope, down to the bottom half of the room. He felt like a fool. Everyone else was raising Hell, working like mad to try and fend off the Covenant. Where was he? What was he doing?<p>

He was sitting, perched somewhere with a rifle in his hands.

It wasn't that he didn't like sniping. That wasn't it at all. He just preferred to have some of the fun too.

Although, he had to admit, that last shot—that felt good.

He smiled—then shrugged it off. He could feel the effects of the adrenaline slowly beginning to wear down. Once they did, he'd be next to useless, and he knew it.

"Zeke," Demon's voice echoed in his head. He'd removed the AI from the Covenant computers earlier, but had since told the electronic entity "for lack of a better term" to shut the Hell up.

"What?" he asked, peering through the scope.

"These creatures," the AI said. "I know why they're all showing up."

"Don't care," he answered.

"Oh, come on." Demon answered. "Give me something here."

"Oh, for the love of-" He stoppedâ€|taking a breath. "Fine; oh Demon, great master of knowledge, share with the unworthy. Tell me: from what depths do these demons come?" As was typical, his voice was dripping with sarcasm and disdain.

"Gladly," the AI said happily. "I've learned through the Covenant databases that these new Worker Drones were originally used to support the Queen but, since she's obviously been removed from the equation, the Covenant Hierarchs were using them to mine and search for Forerunner artifacts."

"Uh-huh," Zeke said, rolling his eyes. "Wake me when you get to the part where I give a damn."

"When High Charity was overtaken, knowledge of every Covenant installation, ship, and planet was discovered by the Flood. Mercy, when he recovered, used the ship's capabilities to jump to the furthest planet he could find that had any military might. Unfortunately, that particular planet was a bust."

"So he moved to the next-closest one and took every single soldier he could find, including these Drones." Zeke finished. "Got it. Still not caring."

"And these new aliens, the Stalkers-"

"Unless you plan on giving me help on killing them," Zeke snapped, "then shut the Hell up!"

"Obviously," Demon continued, "they're stealthy. They focus on killing their prey without being noticed. Because of the way they move, they won't show up on your radar. In addition, the material that makes up their 'scythes' is something ungodly-tough. It's apparently stronger than even the material the Hunters use."

"Splendid." The Spartan answered, putting the rifle on his back.

"And, I just thought I'd tell you," the AI added carefully, "there's one of them-"

"On the balcony behind me," Zeke finished. "Yeah, I know."

He turned around to see the creature moving slowly, silently toward him, each of its arms raised and drawn back for an attack. It stopped when Zeke turned.

"Oh, damn," the Spartan said with a smirk. "Did I ruin the surprise? Sorry." He scowled. "You're gonna have to mask that disgusting scent of yours if you ever expect to sneak up on me; the filters on this suit aren't that good."

Suddenly, the Stalker let out a scream and lunged forward, covering the last fifteen feet between it and the Spartan in less than three seconds. Zeke backed up, toward the edge of the balcony, but was sure to keep at least several feet away from it. He didn't strike at the Stalker at first, only swayed back and forth, ducking and jumping back.

He needed to find a weakness. These ugly bastards had to have one.

The creature swung madly, apparently very upset that its prey was more amused with it than intimidated. Zeke grinned-

And he ducked back just in time to avoid being sliced across the chest.

"Woah!" he shouted. The Stalker raised a scythe and brought it down toward his face. He reached up with both hands and gripped it, but it kept going. It hit his visor and cracked itâ€|then pushed completely through, until the sharp point was only a centimeter from his forehead.

He pushed as hard as he could and then sent a kick in the general direction of the alien's torso. The Spartan got lucky, and the shot connected, sending the alien stumbling long enough for him to remove the neuro-chip from his helmet and yank the whole thing off.

"Damn it," he said, looking at the Stalker. It was strange. He didn't have the assistance of his HUDâ€|that meant his radar, targeting reticule, ammunition counter, shield-indicator, and automatic compensation for lighting were all officially screwed for the day.

On the plus side, he didn't have to hear Demon anymore. He took the chip and placed it in a small compartment on the side of his armor. Then he took the helmet and threw it at the alien.

"Now, see," he said, "I was just playing around. But now you've gone and ruined my good mood." Zeke grinned as he pulled an Energy Sword from the back of his armor. He'd had the foresight to take two from the cache, thankfully.

The Stalker lunged forward again, shrieking the entire time. Zeke blocked the shots, but felt the effects of the adrenaline dwindling, and the longer he fought, the worse it got. He dodged low and impaled the alien, then spun and threw it over the side of the balcony.

"Oh, wow." He said, looking down. His vision, for a second, went blurryâ€|then it returned to normal. "Damned adrenaline," he growled. The Spartan turned back toward the door to the balcony-

And he stopped cold.

Two more of the Stalkers had entered, and were creeping slowly toward him. Zeke shook his head. Just the way they movedâ€|it was utterly petrifying. It was like something out of the world's scariest horror movie. They were dead-silent, and their big, ugly, extended maws didn't help matters.

But, still, the Spartan only grinned. He pulled two Spike Grenades

from his armor and began spinning them in his hands, his arms loosely outstretched to the sides.

"Come on," he said, cocking his head back. "You wanna play?" A familiar smirk crawled across his face. "Ready? Set? Go."

\* \* \*

><p>"Now die!" Blaine yelled, smashing the hammer down in front of him, less than a foot away from the two Brutes he'd been focused on. They flew backwards, crashing into the wall. Before either could move, Blaine was already on them, burying his fists in their now-unarmored abdomens. When he took a step back, they both collapsed.<p>

"Look out below!" A voice suddenly sounded in his ears. He recognized it as Zeke's and glanced up to see his teammate back-flip off the edge of the balcony. Before Ezekiel had even righted himself, Blaine saw a storm of spikes soar over the edge horizontally, flying until they had dug themselves into the far wall.

And, with them, came two of the Stalkers.

The two aliens " now either dead or dying from being impaled by the spikes " fell from the ledge right after Ezekiel. The Spartan turned and landed solidly on the floor nearly twenty yards from Blaine, close to the middle of the room. And, two seconds after he did, the two alien carcasses crashed to the ground about three feet behind him, one on each side.

"Good to see you can still make an entrance," Blaine said, scowling.

"Good to see you can still hold your own." Zeke returned, motioning to the two Brutes in the wall. Blaine grinned slightly, then noticed something.

"Where the Hell is your helmet?"

"It's up there." Zeke said, motioning to the balcony. "I got a little"careless."

"The word is cocky." Blaine said bitterly. He sighed, then shrugged. "Well, I guess we'll just-" He stopped when he heard the familiar sound of footsteps behind him and turned to see one of the Stalkers less than ten feet away, and closing fast.

The creature shrieked and lashed out with its two upper-limbs. Blaine reached up and gripped both of them where the 'scythe' began to curve and held them tight.

"Nice try," he growled. Suddenly, the Stalker pulled its other two arms back and lashed out toward his abdomen, apparently intending more to impale him than to slice his armor. Thinking quickly, Blaine drew his whole body back, turned slightly, and inserted himself between the two limbs"then clamped his bent elbows in toward him, effectively holding the creature's dangerous weapons there, stuck between his sides and his arms.

And again, the damned thing began to shriek and scream. It opened its

mouth and Blaine could see three rows of teeth inside, all of them as sharp as the scythes on its arms. The Stalker thrust its head forward until it was only inches from Blaine's helm, and then shrieked again.

That was enough. Blaine drew his head back and slammed it as hard as he could into the creature's face. The Stalker drew back, shrieking in a higher pitch, and Blaine yanked it forward and head-butted it again.

After three successive hits, the alien's face now looked terribly deformed, and its teeth were littering the ground. Its body suddenly went limp, and Blaine tossed it into the nearest wall hard enough to break bones.

The white-armored Spartan sighed. He could handle one of them but, looking around the chamber, he saw four of them now engaged in battles with his fellow Spartans, and more just seemed to keep showing up.

\* \* \*

><p>"What the Hell are these damned things?" Landon shouted. Jason only shook his head. He sure didn't know.<p>

The two of them were standing back-to-back, trying to fend off four of the new "Stalkers," as they'd been called. Their shields were raised and both Spartans had Shotguns ready, but it was hard to get a shot in with sixteen super-sharp scythes ready and waiting to remove limbs in a heartbeat.

Suddenly, in a flash, Jason's shield went from blue to a deep purple.

The charge was nearly up.

"We need to do something now!" He said, glancing back to see that Landon's shield had done the exact same thing.

BOOM!

Something hit one of the Stalkers in the back, detonating and engulfing it in green smoke and energy. Another blast hit it, and it fell to the ground, dead. It seemed that these new soldiers weren't particularly resilient either.

The other three stopped attacking for a moment to look at the source of the carnage. Jason smiled.

Magnus.

"Why don't you bastards play with even numbers?" He shouted. Instantly, another of the Stalkers began to ignore Jason and Landon, instead choosing to slowly approach the larger Spartan.

Jason didn't get it at first. It didn't make sense. He'd already seen these new aliens in actionâ€|they were smarter than that. Why would it-

"Magnus, look out!" The words had barely left his mouth before a

Stalker that had been slowly approaching from behind was literally on Magnus' back, cutting into the giant's armor with all four of its appendages. And, in seconds, the second one was on him too, tearing at his breastplate.

Before Jason could think of moving, one of the last two Stalkers that had been attacking him and Landon was away from them and running at Magnus as well, covering the thirty-feet like it was nothing. The alien leapt into the air-

And met with a several-ton, biomechanical female at the height of its jump.

Stephanie slammed into the creature from the side, latching onto it and slamming it to the ground. Before it could move, she had taken one of its arms by the 'scythe' and twisted it, again and again and again, until it had reached its limit and even Jason heard the bones crack and break.

The alien shrieked and suddenly stood up, using power that belied its slender form to toss Stephanie away from it like a toy-

CRACK!

Jason half-expected the Stalker Stephanie was fighting to drop, but, instead, turned and saw the first one that had latched onto Magnus go completely limp, and fall from the giant Spartan's back, dead.

Apparently now able to focus, Magnus ignored the slicing of the creature in front of him that was tearing at his armor and his skin and grabbed the Stalker by the neck. Holding it out in front of him, he opened the palm of his other hand mere inches from the alien's face.

BOOM!

The green-armored giant dropped the new corpse, panting. Jason could see that his armor had been torn all the way through in dozens of places, and that he was bleeding terribly in a few of them.

"Magnus," Jason said, "are you-"

"Little help, Jason!" Landon shouted suddenly. His words were punctuated by a Shotgun blast.

Jason turned to see that Landon had been doing battle with the last of the Stalkers alone, and without much luck. One of the alien's arms was hanging at a strange angle and bleeding, but it didn't even seem to notice.

"On my count," Jason said, raising his arm-shields and motioning for Landon to do the same. "Oneâ€|twoâ€|three!"

Jason came from behind and rammed the Stalker with his two shields while Landon mimicked the action from the front, smashing the alien between the two Spartans. When they took a step back, it collapsed, its bone-structure completely crushed.

"This is ridiculous." Landon said, reloading the Shotgun wearily.  
"Where's Sam? We need to get the Hell outta here."

"We've been trying to raise him," Magnus said, answering. "None of us have gotten an answer."

\* \* \*

><p>BOOM!<p>

Another explosion echoed through the narrow corridor as Samuel threw the last Fragmentation Grenade he had on him. The shrapnel tore through a pair of the new aliens, but four more still remained, and they weren't the least bit deterred by the deaths of their brethren.

The giant Spartan scowled, limping backwards. One Shotgun was completely empty. The other was down to only two shots. His Spartan Laser had enough in it for two more bursts, but he was afraid to use it, lest he should truly need it later.

Sam had a single Plasma Grenade left after taking one from a Grunt on the way by, but that wasn't going to help with four of these new aliens. And he sure as Hell couldn't outrun them in his current state.

"Dang it," he said to himself, "come on. Think."

Before he could come up with anything, the Stalkers closed in and began to surround him. Slowly, methodically, they inched around to the sides.

"Oh no, you don't," he said, raising both Shotguns out of instinct. He backed away slowly, painfully aware that only one of the two weapons was of any use to him. Still, there was a chance-

Heavy footsteps behind him caused him to turn. There were two Brutes that had just come from a side-door.

These two, however, were something new. They weren't Minors, Majors, or Chieftains. They were clad in strange, glowing orange armor on their knees, shoulders and chests, and both were wearing large, elaborate headdresses. In addition, both were wielding two huge, spear-like staves, which each ended in dual prongs that were glowing the same color as the Brutes' armor.

"Great," he said, "just perfect." He put one Shotgun away, primed the Plasma Grenade, and threw it as hard as he could at the nearest Stalker to buy time. Thankfully, it hit the alien right in its ugly face, and the other three backed way up for the ensuing explosion.

The second the grenade went off, Samuel turned around and blasted the nearest Brute in the face with the Shotgun. It recoiled, howling, and he used his free hand to snatch the spear from its grip.

"Demon!" the other roared, and thrust out with its own weapon. Sam lunged to the right and sunk his own spear into the exposed side of the Brute's neck. He knew time was in short supply, so he didn't even



try to pry his spear from the alien's flesh; he simply ripped the other spear from its hands and used the blunt end to beat the other, still dazed Brute until it stopped moving.

And then, as quickly as he'd started, he stopped cold and turned around, ready for the Stalkers.

But they were gone.

"What?" he whispered. "Where-"

The attack came from the left, through the same door that the Brutes had emerged from. Two of them lunged at him. The first found its open mouth chewing on the end of the Shotgun barrel, and Samuel pulled the trigger.

BANG!

The alien's brain-matter and gore sprayed one wall even as the other one took wide slices at the brown-armored Spartan's stomach. Samuel dropped the Shotgun and twisted the spear, bashing the alien in the side of the head with it. It shrieked and-

SLAM!

The last remaining alien came from behind him, from the door opposite the one the Brutes had used. It jumped onto his back and he stumbled forward, directly into the Stalker he'd just been dealing with.

With the blunt end of the spear still in front of him, Samuel angled the weapon and thrust his left arm back with it as hard as he could. He felt resistance, and plunged the weapon through. A piercing alien shriek resounded in the corridor and the weight on his back shifted off of him as the Stalker began to writhe on the floor.

But that wasn't the end of it. The other alien was now back into a full assault, trying to impale the Spartan lying on top of it. Samuel gripped the two uppermost limbs and twisted them inwards. He felt them reach their limits, and he pushed them further, snapping them at the joints.

"Now, die!" he growled, taking the two now-limp scythes and shoving them into the creature's neck. It died within only a few seconds, and the giant Spartan was left alone in the hall once more.

Now he was tired, limping, and bleeding from the last sneak-attack.

"Wonderful," he snapped, yanking the spear from the dead Stalker.

\* \* \*

><p>Magnus silently did a count of how many Fuel Rods he had left in his reserves. He'd started with twenty-two (because of the two that he couldn't fire), fired eighteen of them, and then gathered thirteen more from fallen bodies. After that, he'd fired eleven of them, and gathered eight. So that leftâ€|<p>

\_Fourteen,\_ he thought bitterly. \_That leaves me fourteen shots.\_

He glanced around the room, painfully aware that he was almost completely out of biofoam in his armor. Almost all of it had been used to stop the bleeding from the last attack.

The carnage was insane. Huge, bloated carcasses of the Worker Drones masked half the battlefield, but the rest of it was littered with the bodies and gore of a half-dozen Covenant soldiers. Add to that the thirty-some Brutes that, for some reason, just kept on coming, and it was ridiculous.

Thankfully, the giant Spartan had caught a break after the last assault, as most of the Covenant were scattered, and no particularly dangerous force had entered in some time. Landon and Jason were dealing with a few lightly-armed Brutes. Stephanie and Victoria were dispatching four Stalkers that had just appeared. Blaine was near one of the doorways, waging his own hammer-based war with anything and everything that was brave or foolish enough to come within his range. Ezekiel was...doing nothing.

Magnus did a double-take. The black-armored Spartan had one hand on a wall, and was panting heavily.

\_He's got to be injured,\_ Magnus thought. \_There's no other way. He wouldn't be-\_

A Stalker approaching the Spartan caught his attention. Zeke glanced over his shoulder to see it, then took his hand off the wall and purposely turned his back to the alien.

"Zeke!" Magnus roared into his helmet. Then he realized that, without his own helmet, Ezekiel wouldn't hear a word he said.

The Stalker seemed puzzled. It moved toward the black-armored Spartan slowly, cautiously, as if it had no idea what to expect. It stepped closer and closer until it was around eight feet from him-

Suddenly, Zeke turned around " his Energy Sword activated " and lunged at the alien. Before the Stalker could respond, he'd impaled it, yanked the sword out, and dug the offensive-mount on his left elbow into the creature's neck.

And then, he collapsed, falling to his knees on the floor as the Covenant soldier's lifeless body fell right next to him.

\_What the Hell?\_ He thought. \_He's down! He's on-\_

His thoughts were interrupted as a door behind him slid open. Magnus turned around to see a group of seven Brutes " all armed with Fuel Rod Guns and Gravity Hammers " coming from the hallway that Blaine had been fighting near.

It was the same hallway that the Spartans had come through, opposite the one that Samuel had chased the Prophet down.

It was their way out.

And it was unlocked.

"Blaine!" Magnus shouted as loudly as he could, and unloaded a dozen Fuel Rods on the group that had just entered. He fired and fired and

fired until the green haze had completely consumed their bodies and his arms felt as if they were on fire. He took a knee and shouted through the pain, "Blaine! Keep the door open! We have to keep it open!"

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine immediately turned to see the open door begin glowing bright red and start to close. He ran at full speed and leapt into the opening, putting his hands out to the side and above his head, gripping the sides of the door as they tried to close.<p>

His arms threatened to give as the power output on his HUD rose higher and higher, and the pressure from the doors continued to increase. Finally, the numbers stopped, and he gritted his teeth, refusing to let the door close.

"I've got it!" He shouted.

Unfortunately, while his announcement served its purpose in alerting the rest of the Spartans, it also attracted the attention of a nearby Stalker that had been "up 'til that point" preparing to attack the downed Magnus.

The creature stared him down, approaching him slowly, carefully.

\_It knows I can't move,\_ Blaine thought angrily. The alien continued to get closer, until it was less than ten feet away from the white-armored Spartan.

"Back off!" Blaine growled. "Back the Hell off!"

The Stalker ignored him, inching closer. Blaine felt a bead of sweat dripping on his forehead. He knew all too well: he would die before he let the door close.

Suddenly, without warning, it struck, lashing out with one of its limbs, directly toward his outstretched right arm. Blaine pulled it in slightly so that the limb bent and the alien's scythe missed it by less than an inch, and then raised his right leg and sent his knee smashing into the alien's abdomen.

The Stalker's head lurched forward as it shrieked in pain, and Blaine grinned as he pulled his head back and threw it forward with all the strength he had. It crashed into the alien's head, and the Covenant soldier stumbled backwards, howling.

"You and your whole damn species can kiss my ass!" Blaine yelled as the alien stood up and quieted down. It let out a low, quiet hiss and raised its arms-

Two forms passed under Blaine's outstretched arms at such a speed that they were nothing but a gold and white blur. In less than a full second, the two aliens had already pounced on the Stalker and a trio of Energy Swords had ripped through its flesh and bone.

Before Blaine could blink, it was over. The Stalker was on the ground, bleeding, and the two Elites were standing over it, their mandibles spread wide.

"Thanks for that," Blaine said. "I'm glad to see you guys!"

"Sorry we're late, Demon," the gold-armored Sangheili answered, deactivating the Energy Sword in his hand.

The white-armored, SpecOps Elite mimicked his Commander's action, deactivating the twin swords that he was holding. He added coolly, "we had some business to attend to."

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel closed his eyes as his vision blurred once more. He'd gotten lucky with the last Stalker, and he knew it. Another attack, even from a Brute Minor, and he was dead. There wasn't any way around it.<p>

He was officially done for the day.

Panting, he tried to force himself off the floor, but found that he could only just barely manage to get on his arms and his knees. He looked up to see that the others were moving slowly toward a doorway that Blaine was keeping open.

\_They must've gotten word from Sam,\_ he thought.

Suddenly, he made out the shapes of two Elites standing near the white-armored Spartan. He scowled.

\_What are those two doing here?\_

"Ezekiel!" a muffled voice echoed nearby. It was female.

\_Great,\_ he thought sarcastically. This was exactly how he wanted to be seen by the others, crippled and lying face-down on the ground, without even his helmet to mask his reaction to it all.

"Demon," another voice said, this one much clearer. It was U'svere. He recognized it as the Sangheili worked with Victoria to haul him up and help him toward the doorway.

\_Thisâ€¦\_he thought, shaking his head,\_ this is shit. Honestly. What did I do to deserve this?\_ It was humiliating. He'd never be able to show his face after this.

"Don'tâ€¦help me!" He gasped bitterly, trying to pull his arms free.

"Stop it." Victoria snapped. "Knock it off!"

Reluctantly, Ezekiel stopped fighting as they lifted him through the door. It wasn't like he had the energy to keep going anyway.

"Come on!" Zeke could hear Magnus shouting, though his voice was muffled through his helmet. The rest of the Spartans filed through the door, and Blaine let it go as he came in after them. Immediately, it slammed shut.

"Come," Ahrmonro said, "we have a ship in one of the minor hangars."

"We haven't heard from Sam yet." Victoria said.

"I got a hold of him," Magnus said. "He's on his way, but I'm guessing that the door we just came through is about to-"

Zeke heard the sound of the door suddenly sliding open.

"Yep," Magnus finished, "I figured."

Zeke, now standing with only Victoria's help, watched as a dozen Stalkers and an equal amount of Brutes gathered at the doorway and began to file in after them.

"I don't think so!" Magnus shouted, and the hallway began to glow green as he unloaded at least fifteen Fuel Rods into the crowd. He kept firing until the entire group of aliens was masked in a burning green haze.

\* \* \*

><p>Victoria stood there, waiting anxiously for the smoke to clear as Magnus hit his knees, panting and clenching his fists in front of him. When it finally dissipated, she couldn't suppress a gasp.<p>

There, already working to replace the group of Covenant that Magnus had just decimated, were more than forty additional aliens, all filing into the hall.

"What now?" Landon shouted, raising a Shotgun.

"The ship isn't far." U'svere answered, activating his twin swords. "We can make it."

Before anyone could respond, a voice echoed in the Spartans' helms. "Everybody down!" It was Samuel.

"Sam? What'd you say?"

"Everybody hit the ground, right now! Just do it!"

"Hit the dirt!" Blaine shouted to the Elites as the group dove for the ground. Victoria dropped down, dragging Ezekiel down with her, since he couldn't have heard the announcement.

No sooner had they dropped than a blood-red beam cut through the air above them, tearing through fully half the Covenant soldiers that had gathered outside â€" maybe more. She could see Samuel running toward them from the previous room, still holding the Spartan Laser at his chest.

"Stay down!" He yelled, and fired another blast. He swung the laser sideways as it fired and cut through whatever remained of the Covenant reinforcements. "Alright!" he shouted as he came through the doorway. Victoria could already see groups of Covenant amassing on the other side.

"They're gonna keep coming!" Jason said. Suddenly, Victoria heard laughter. It took her a moment to realize that it was Ezekiel.

"They'reâ€|" he started, breathing hard, "not gonnaâ€|followâ€|" He laughed again. "Not this time."

Suddenly, the door that they'd come through began to glow red and slammed shut. All around the Spartans, wall-mounted computer terminals began to flash as symbols scrolled across them at maddening speeds. The lights even started to flicker for a few moments.

"Looks like the Covies got a bug in their system," Jason said, glancing around. Ezekiel laughed once more.

"It would seemâ€|" he said, somehow still able to give his typical, cold laugh with limited air, "that it's...a little more...demonic...that thatâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Well, that's that! I'm gonna try to finish up this segment, but it may take a bit. Please, be patient with me, and keep reading! I'm so close to finishing this, after over a year of working on it. I'd love to top 600 reviews, but I'm thinking it probably won't happen (given my hiatus and such...I can't blame anyone, lol). Still, I want to take the best shot at it that I can, so please don't hesitate to tell me what you think! Thanks all!<strong>

\*\*Oh, and if you wanted a picture of the Stalkers (in case my description sucks...lol), you can go to Halopedia and type in "Stalker." I tried to put a link at the bottom of the page, but FanFiction disagreed with me...so...yeah. Sorry, I tried.\*\*

\*\*Thanks again, and enjoy!\*\*

## 49. Chapter 48: The End Of The Covenant

\*\*Author's Notes: Alright...here we go. Chapter 48 is officially up...and I'm working on 49 right now. Reviews first!\*\*

\*\*REVIEWS:\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Hey! Any websites good for Flood info, I'm all ears for. Send me an e-mail, if you got a good one, please. And thanks a lot for your review!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Well, I don't want to disappoint you...the major action for this segment is pretty much finished, lol. But, the Elites will have their five minutes of glory, so to speak. ;) Thank you for reviewing! \*\*

\*\*Mhop12: Nah, I'm not dead...you guys aren't that lucky. ;) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Lecter42: I'm glad the new baddies live up to your expectations (and everyone else's, lol). I was really worried about how they'd be viewed by the general reader...since they're technically not canon. But, they did pretty well. I'm happy with them.\*\*

\*\*And yes, you'd be correct to assume that those were Honor Guards. They weren't with Mercy because they...well, they had some things to that required their immediate, undivided attention. Yeah, I know...the Prophet comes first...but, well...read on. And I'm glad you liked the "vulnerable" side of the team. I've allowed them to be mostly invincible for a long time...but, with these last two segments...all bets are off. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: I WISH they were in the actual game. That would be freakin' sweet. But, I'll settle for adding them to my story if all else fails, lol. Thank you for reviewing! I hope you like what's to come.\*\*

\*\*1 way ticket: Ha-ha-ha...funny funny. You're hilarious. ;) You've read most of the this chapter...so, I can't say much. But, I hope you like the bits I added. The next one will be much better, and much longer. Thanks for reviewing! Talk to you soon. :)\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: Wow, I'm glad you liked it so much, lol. I'm sorry to say that you probably won't be so thrilled with this one...but, don't worry! Things will pick up again really soon. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Samson00: You're never online anymore!! Jerk! Kidding, kidding. ;) Anyways, yeah...I tried to give everyone a little play-time last chapter. This one's kinda boring, but I'll pick stuff up again real soon. You know a lot about the last segment, so you know what's comin'. It's gonna be SWEET. ;) Thanks for reading and reviewing, and I hope you get a break in college long enough to read what's coming up. Oh, and in regards to Magnus...how did your girlfriend say it? Drop, drag, burn, bury, game, set, match...I WIN. I feel like I missed something...lol.\*\*

\*\*hellhoundcreberus: lol, the only info I can give you is what's ahead. No worries though...if I kill anyone, I'll be sure to at least do it in the final segment. ;) Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*Tr7th: Thanks! Hope you'll keep reading!\*\*

\*\*Ajihadbmw: Thanks very much for the compliment...but I can assure you, there are plenty of authors on FanFic far better than I. You just gotta read around, and get lucky enough to find one. But, again, I do appreciate the compliment. Thanks for your review as well!\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: Hey, thanks! They're not quite out yet...but they're right on the edge. I hope you're looking forward to the last segment...it's gonna be great, if I have any say in it (and I DO...I'm the author...lol). Thank you for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Redflame101: Oh yeah...they can. You know what my first thought was? RUN. Run fast, and hide well. ;) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: Hey! We've talked a bit about the story in the last few days, but I'll cover the bases really quick. First of all, I'm glad that bit of teamwork was what you had in mind (it was your suggestion that caused me to try and think of it, lol). So, that's a

very big plus. However, a lot of your questions about Magnus, the injuries, the enhancements, Victoria, etc...they'll be explored just a little bit in this chapter, and a lot more later on. Sorry...this one's short, and the cramped confines of...oops. Almost gave it away. Well, it's not the right scene for me to do too much with character development, lol. Hope you like, and, as always, thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*NOW, that having been done...time for the next chapter. Before you start, however, allow me to warn you: it is short. It is not my greatest. There are a lot of "hints" to character development, but not a lot gets done. Expect a LOT more of it in the next few chapters before my last segment really gets fired up. For now...this is just the escape, the end...\*\*

\*\*The end of the Covenant.\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 48:<strong>

â€" \*\*The End Of The Covenant â€"\*\*

\*\*0150 Hours - February 2, 2553\*\*

\*\*Aboard the Covenant Assault Carrier - Outside Earth's Orbit\*\*

"Hurry, Demons!" Ahrmonro shouted, ushering the Spartans forward at a breakneck pace. "We're almost there."

"Almost where?" Stephanie questioned. "Where are we going?"

"We are going to the main hangar." U'svere answered from the back of the group. He was watching for followers, armed with a Fuel Rod Gun he'd taken from one of the fallen Brutes.

Blaine glanced back and forth down the hall, waiting on more Covenant soldiers to come pouring as, just as they'd been doing since Zulu Company had arrived on this God-forsake ship. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Victoria and Landon hauling Zeke's body forward.

And they were having a time of it.

"Is he still fighting?" Blaine asked.

"A little," Victoria growled, and the helmless Spartan shook his head furiously, still trying to move.

"Give him here." Blaine scowled, taking the other Spartan and all but throwing him over one shoulder. He shook his head and looked right at him. "She actually likes you," he said, "but if you struggle with me, I'll drop your sorry ass, got it?"

Zeke muttered something under his breath, but stopped fighting nonetheless.

"Good." Blaine said, still holding the Gravity Hammer in his free hand. He followed Samuel as the front half of the group rounded a corner-



And saw a green door to the right begin to slide open.

"Oh, Hell no," the white-armored Spartan growled. He pulled his right hand to the left, away from the door, and then swung it and the hammer back as hard as he could. He didn't see what the head of the Covenant weapon made contact with, but he felt it, and he heard at least a trio of aliens skid along the floor in the darkened hall.

Samuel nodded back to him. "Good reaction time," he laughed.

"They're lucky I'm playing mule to our own private pain-in-the-ass." He said, "or I'd have done some real damage to the ugly bastards."

"This is it." Ahrmonro said, coming to a stop in front of red, glowing door. "Why is it locked?"

"This isn't a minor hangar!" Landon shouted. "This is the main hangar!"

The Field Master's mandibles spread wide. "There has been a change of plans." He said. "Now, can we open the door?"

"Alright," Blaine said, looking to Zeke, "give me the chip."

Surprisingly, the black-armored Spartan pulled the free neuro-chip from his armor and handed it over without even a word.

"Thank you," Blaine said casually, grabbing it and pushing it into a slot by the door. It began to glow bright blue, and the door's light changed colors as well, from red to green. "Here's your friend back." With that, he gave the chip back to Zeke.

Even as the door slid open, Blaine could hear the sound of Covenant soldiers behind them. They were chasing them with every soldier they had.

And they were close.

\* \* \*

><p>"Let us go!" Ahrmonro growled, leading the way into the hangar.<p>

It was huge, just as Samuel remembered it. But, also as he remembered, it was almost empty. The only change from before was that there was one Phantom parked in the center of the room, and it was the same color as Magnus' armor, the mark of the Separatists.

Samuel felt that there was something strange about the room. It didn't make sense, but he was sure that they were being watchedâ€|that they weren't aloneâ€|that-

"We gotta hurry!" Landon yelled. "They're right on our asses!"

At that, U'svere let out a noise that, to Samuel, sounded like a

Sangheili laugh. "What's your rush, Demon?" He asked. "Do you not want to stay for the show?"

Even as he said it, Ahrmonro led the Spartans to the Phantom, walking at a brisk, but unworried pace. They were less than ten yards from the ship when Sam heard the door to the hangar slide open.

"Demons!" Inside the door, a single Brute Chieftain was roaring as loud as it could.

"Demons!" a second later, the sound echoed from another door, off to the right. Within moments, dozens of doors on all levels of the hangar were sliding open, and the Brutes' favorite word was being shouted all around them.

"Can we even make it out of here?" Jason asked as the group came closer together at the base of the Phantom, waiting for the Field Master to open it. "They'll shoot us down."

"They will do nothing." U'svere said as the Covenant soldiers began to pour down to the bottom floor. Only a select few elected to engage them from above, as nearly every soldier leapt down the floors until the bottom floor of the hangar was flooded with aliens—all of them bent on the destruction of the group before them.

"Any ideas?" Blaine asked, shifting Zeke's weight before simply putting him on the ground beside the Phantom.

"I have one, Demon." Ahrmonro said. After he said it, he activated his Energy Sword and raised it high into the air. "Finish it!" He shouted into the air. "This war ends now! Kill the beasts!" He punctuated his statement with a loud, triumphant roar that seemed to echo for eternity.

It was only after ten seconds of solid bellowing that Samuel realized: it wasn't the Field Master's roar that was echoing, but the roars of a hundred white-armored Sangheili that had been waiting in the room, cloaked and ready.

And the Covenant were caught completely off-guard.

The lowest soldiers—the Grunts, Jackals, and Drones—all panicked, fleeing and shooting backwards into the fray. The few Hunters that had come into the room were picked apart by dozens of swords and torn to shreds by countless Fuel Rod Guns.

And the ones that made up the majority of the forces, the Brutes and the Stalkers, were—for lack of a better word—slaughtered. Caught unawares and without backup, the Covenant soldiers were completely decimated, cut through by the dozens as Energy Swords flashed to life all around them.

When the batteries of the Energy Swords had reached their ends, each Elite brought out a weapon of choice, including everything from Plasma Rifles and Carbines to Beam Rifles and Needlers.

And the slaughter continued.

Samuel could only watch in awe while the Covenant soldiers completely ignored the Spartans as they fought in vain for their lives. In less

than five minutes, the forces that had appeared en masse to destroy them were lying dead on the floor, while the Elites had suffered only minimal casualties.

In less than five minutes, it was over.

It was all over.

"Shall we go?" U'svere asked calmly, looking to Samuel.

\* \* \*

><p>"So, I guess that explains what you guys were doing before you showed up." Jason said, sitting in a corner of the Phantom as it left the ship. "You were setting up for the big finale."<p>

"Yes and no, Demon," Ahrmonro said. "That might have seemed like a great number of Covenant soldiers, but our group successfully dealt with many more before we came to find you. In fact, a few of us had come to the ship only a few minutes after you arrived. Our first priority was to separate Mercy from his Honor Guards, so that he would be slightly easier prey for you." The gold-armored Elite clicked his mandibles loudly.

"After that," U'svere continued, "we found out that two of your soldiers had been taken captive, and the two of us went to search for them." He let out a growl that Jason had come to recognize as a Sangheili laugh. "We found one detainment cell, but all we found in and around it were the bodies of several Brutes."

"Zeke's handiwork, no doubt," Magnus said, shaking his head.

"It could have been Blaine's." Landon chipped in, but Blaine raised a hand.

"I wasn't in a detainment cell." He said. "I was just in a room with a computer terminal. I don't think it was ever meant to be used as a prison."

"We saw that room as well." Ahrmonro said. "There was a Brute outside. Although, it would have been hard to tell from just the face."

"That was me." Blaine said with a laugh.

"So," Samuel interrupted, "what happens now?" He was facing the Elites. "How long are the other Sangheili going to stay on the ship?"

"We are not sure yet, Demon." Ahrmonro answered. "I believe that your leaders have agreed to let us take the ship home, once it has been cleared of the Brutes and other Covenant soldiers." He paused. "Though, U'svere and I will likely take a different ship."

"I understand." Samuel said.

"What about all of us?" Landon asked. "What now? The war's over. That means weâ€|well, we'reâ€|"

"We're out of a job, for starters." Blaine said, letting out a

laugh.

"No kidding," Stephanie said. "What are we gonna do now?"

"Well," Magnus said, "the first thing I'm gonna do is get my armor fixed." He motioned to the cuts that ran clean through, all the way to his flesh. "And then," he said, "I'm getting these damned Fuel Rods removed from the back of my arms."

Jason was as puzzled as any of the other Spartans. "What are you talking about?"

Magnus sighed. "ONI put two of them in the back of 'cannon' segment of my arms. They allow them toâ€¦" he worked to think of the right word. "They allow them to try to bend my will, when I decline their orders." He laughed bitterly, "as they no doubt will do when I get back because I left the Prophet onboard."

Jason pondered the idea. After several seconds, he nodded, coming to a conclusion. "I think I might be able to help you with that."

\* \* \*

><p>"Ugh. What time is it?" Ezekiel's first question was his standard one after being unconscious for any length of time. "How longâ€¦" he coughed, closing his eyes in an attempt to dull the splitting headache he had. "Howâ€¦long was I out?"<p>

And of course, fate could have only one voice answer: hers.

"It's been a little over an hour since we left the Assault Carrier." A pause, then, "how are you feeling?"

"Like Hell," the black-armored Spartan growled, noticing that he still had to work to breathe properly. "How do Iâ€¦look like I'm feeling?"

"Just asking," she said defensively. "We're skipping the Atonement and heading straight back to Earth. Magnus, Sam, and Blaine all need medical attention too."

"Don'tâ€¦care." Zeke managed. "How much longer?"

"Hey, you awake over there?" It was Blaine.

"Yes."

Blaine's next comment was enough to get Zeke's blood boiling again. "Vic," he said, "is he still bitching?"

Ezekiel scowled. "Bite me."

"Pass." Blaine answered. "But I'm sure I could find an alien somewhere to oblige."

Before Zeke could answer, Victoria interrupted.

"We should be landing in another hour." Another pause, followed by, "you should go back to sleep until then. You've been sedated to try and keep your breathing down until we get to Earth. You're still

going to need surgery for your lung."

"What?" He snapped. "I've been sedated?" He cursed under his breath, then thought about her last words. "I do not need surgery."

Victoria laughed quietly. "You're not exactly going to prevent anyone from operatingâ€|not in your current state." She answered matter-of-factly. Ezekiel could almost see the grin on her face.

"Watch me." He growled.

\* \* \*

><p>Magnus sat quietly in one corner of the Phantom, listening to the small, pointless conversations going on between his teammates.<p>

\_Teammates?\_ He thought, puzzled. \_Teammates?\_ He just couldn't seem to wrap his mind around the concept. It'd been so long. Hell, he had only just heard in the last month that Christopher Stryker had been killedâ€|long ago. ONI had made no attempt to keep him in the loop.

None at all.

He shook his head and glanced around the ship, trying to get a grip on the new 'social order' that had evolved since he was taken. It was clear that Samuel had emerged on topâ€|somehow.

Magnus wasn't sure how he felt about that.

As long as he had been around, he'd always felt like he would someday rise to the position of command, like he would be the one giving the orders. Even after Samuel had proven himself the night the power was lost from the Training Ground, Magnus still maintained the hope that he could somehow prove himself.

\_But it would appear that that ship has sailed.\_ Magnus thought bitterly. He let his eyes wander further around the room.

Jason and Landon were as close as ever, if not more so. They were both jokers, clowns in Magnus' eyes. Between that and their shared augmentations, it was no wonder that they'd see a little of themselves in each other.

He moved further, and spotted Victoria, sitting next to an unconscious Zeke Veron. For some unknown, inexplicable reason, Magnus' fists began to clench at his sides.

It wasn't that he still had feelings for that girl. It couldn't be. He'd dealt with that long ago, and it had nearly killed him when he was first taken from the Training Ground.

No, that wasn't it.

So what was it? What was causing him to get so angry?

\_He's trouble.\_ Magnus concluded. \_He's arrogantâ€|proud. Everyone else is second to his wishes. Nothing else matters. He cares only for

himself.\_

So why did she proceed to try to help him? Magnus could only conclude that, based on their shared genetic procedures, the two DNA-altered Spartans could relate to one another better than to most others. It was no different than Jason and Landon, or Stephanie and Blaine.

The relationship was normal, expected.

But, for some reason, his hands were still clenched, and beginning to dent the armor on his palms.

\_Why? \_He thought. \_Why am I so angry? He and Blaine made a promise to me, and they kept it. So whyâ€|\_

"Magnus," the voice was Blaine's.

"Yeah," he said.

"What's wrong?"

Magnus forced his hands to relax. "Sorry," he said. "It's nothingâ€|just thinking."

"Ah," Blaine said, "right." And he dropped the conversation.

Magnus sat still, forcing himself to stay calm. He knew that his "people-skills" had suffered from his time with ONI. He had no reason to be angry. The team had evolved without him. Like the bonds that had formed between the other Spartans, it was normal. It was expected.

It was necessary.

He smiled behind his helmet at the thought. Up until that moment, he'd been so preoccupied with the idea that the world had gone on without himâ€|he'd forgotten that he too had had to make some changes, some compromises.

He'd once sworn that no augmentation, no suppression of his emotions or genetic alteration could destroy the feelings he had for Victoria. And he told the freaks at ONI that. He told them that he'd sooner burn in Hell than give up on her.

And he'd lied.

It had been made painfully clear that some things would have to change if he was going to surviveâ€|and he'd surrendered those feelings eventually, without even a struggle. He gave up on the idea of a normal life, of anything outside of war, and he'd done it without even putting up a fight.

Just like that, his fists were clenched again. But, this time, the anger was directed at ONI...

â€|where it belonged.

Magnus looked down at his arms, at the devices that those spooks were using to control him. Jason had said that he could help. He went on to say that Blaine might be able to give him a hand as well. But they

wouldn't know until they landed.

He sighed quietly. One question rang out in his mind before all others, before Samuel's ability to command, Victoria's current state, or even his new place in the team. With the Covenant destroyed, the Prophet killed, and the Sangheili finishing the war in space, just one question remained, echoing in his mind.

\_What now?\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Okay, I know, it's really short, and not all that great. That's why I'm getting one written right now...and I'm hoping and praying to get it done and posted before tomorrow evening. <strong>

\*\*And yes, I know...100 Elites is a lot. More than you ever see. But, this is IT. This is the final end to the Covenant with every Sangheili left on Earth taking part (as I can't see any of them sitting back and saying, "nah, I'll pass on this one."). Is it a lot? Yes. Overkill? Maybe a little. But, it's how I wanted it to end, lol. haha.\*\*

\*\*NOW, that being said, I'm really, really shooting for that 600-review mark, so if I do...I hope you'll please take the time to review both chapters? Please? Thank you. :)\*\*

\*\*Yes, I know, it's not nice of me to pry for reviews, but this story has done really well so far, and as I wrap it up, I want it to have as great of numbers as I can get for it. And, as more and more people e-mail me...telling me to "submit this to Bungie," I'm actually beginning to consider it. If I do, the beginning and several individual parts will have to be redone...but, at least know that I have considered your input. As of right now...only time will tell.\*\*

\*\*Still...don't get your hopes up. ;)\*\*

\*\*\_ AJ\*\*

## 50. Chapter 49: Peace

\*\*Author's Notes: Alright, I know, a couple days late, but it's still two chapters (short ones) in less than a week...and I've got college work...so, I can do no better than that! lol. Also, my quick disclaimer because I've gotten a few PMs and I think some people might be under the wrong impression:\*\*

\*\*THIS IS NOT THE END OF ZULU COMPANY. THIS IS NOT EVEN THE END OF THIS STORY. THERE IS ANOTHER SEGMENT THAT BEGINS OFFICIALLY AFTER THIS CHAPTER.\*\*

\*\*Thank you.\*\*

\*\*Now, that all being said, Reviews first!\*\*

\*\*Mhop12: lol, one more person telling me to submit. haha. Thank you very much, and we'll see. If I do, I can assure you, I'll let you all

know. Glad to hear you'll be reading more...though, I'm sorry for the reason. Trust me...been there. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: Yeah, it was just kind of a filler, lol. But, I'm glad it got a decent reaction from most. I hope you like this one, although it's really, really different from what I'm used to. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Well, I can assure you, I'm far from finished. This is just the wrap-up for the space segment. And, I don't really care if you "advertise" in a Review. It's not that a big a deal to me. Lord knows, I'm not being paid, you're not taking anything from my "bottom line," lol, so no worries.\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: Hey! I think I've answered most of your questions in this chapter (particularly Blaine and Jason, the timeline issue, and a little more about Magnus, I hope). It's not great, but you know...this isn't my thing, lol. It's new to me. Also, the idea of an actual battle with Stalkers and Sangheili intrigues me...and I can assure you that I'll be bringing them both back sometime (though, honestly, probably not in this book). Thanks for your input and for reading the first part of it for me...it's always helpful to me to have a second opinion. And I agree entirely: an eye for an eye. ;) Adios!\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: I'm glad you enjoyed the last one! This one, as I've said...is really different for me and was about a pain to write (you'll see why), but I hope it came out okay. And, if you wanted to see the relationships between Spartans...well, you're in luck. ;) Thank you for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Hey! Well, I don't know what to say...I'm happy that you liked the Elite to Human relationships, but I'm sorry the end of the Covenant disappointed you. Really, in my defense, the battles were essentially over. They'd been doing nothing but fighting for several chapters, and this really was just my "wrap up," if you will. But, I do hope you like the ending to come much better. :) Enjoy, and thanks for your input!\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: Oh, my friend, it's FAR from over. ;) I've got another segment here and another 2 books to do. Trust me, you're not rid of me just yet (unless, of course, you wanted to be...in which case, I can't stop you, lol). Thanks for reviewing, and I hope you like these "final few turns," as you so aptly put it.\*\*

\*\*Woodzyl4: Hey, thanks! As for Magnus...well, you'll see more about his relationship to ONI later on. I don't want to give too much away. You'll see a little here, and then more later, I promise. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hey man! Thanks for proofing this for me, lol. And at the last second, no less. Even letting me interrupt your weekend at home! As usual, your help's been invaluable. And no worries: I didn't forget what we talked about. Magnus will show a bit more of his true color here, but it's not all on display just yet. SO glad you finally got back online, lol. Thanks for reviewing...even in the midst of college which, as we know, is less than kind in how much time it leaves you. ;) \*\*

\*\*vernox: Long time no talk! Glad to hear that you're caught up! And



I LOVE the idea with the Stalkers (is that copyrighted? haha). That would be freakin' awesome, and it makes me wish they had put them in the game. Ah...we can dream, right? Thanks for the compliments, and I hope you like this last segment.\*\*

\*\*With that, I give you: the last chapter of the "space" segment. This is as close to the "happy ending" as you'll ever get from me, so enjoy it. Now, without further delay: Chapter 49!\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 49:<strong>

â€" \*\*Peace â€" \*\*

\*\*1300 Hours - March 11, 2553\*\*

\*\*Birmingham Military Base - Outside Spartan Barracks\*\*

"So, how's that lung treatin' ya?" It had been over a month since the other Spartan got out of surgery, but Blaine was careful to keep his tone neutral. He had to try to avoid sending the smaller soldier into a furious uproar about compassion or pity. He knew how conversations like this one could turn out.

Shockingly, this one didn't turn out that way.

"Not too bad," he answered casually, looking down slightly and letting a grin cross his face. "Docs did a pretty good job this time." He turned to face Blaine. "I feel a hundred times better than I did on the Carrier, that's for sure."

Blaine smiled, not even bothering to mask his reaction. Something had changed in the morale of the entire team after they escaped the Assault Carrier. Even the hardest, stone-cold Spartans like Zeke and himself had let down their guard, had allowed themselves to bathe in the peace.

As a testament to that, the members of Zulu Company were no longer in their armor, instead choosing to walk around the military base in casual, everyday clothing, like normal people.

And they enjoyed it.

Blaine cocked his head and pondered the thought for a moment, realizing that, a month ago, he'd have never opted to wear a pair of jean-shorts and a T-shirt over his MJOLNIR armor. \_Normal people,\_ he mused, suppressing a laugh. \_Who'd have thought?\_

But, looking down at himself and over at his comrade, standing with his back to a wall, clad a pair of khaki shorts and a cutoff, arms crossed but still smiling, he couldn't deny it: without the daily threat of the Covenant waiting to wipe out mankind, life was pretty damn good.

"We did alright." Zeke said finally, taking off his sunglasses and looking out over the grass-covered landscape, into the forest that bordered the base on one side.

Blaine's smile widened slightly. "Damn right."

\* \* \*

><p>"And where would you go?" Victoria asked, quizzing the giant Spartan in front of her. Magnus shook his head. He had no idea.<p>

"I don't know." He admitted, looking around at the Birmingham Military Base. It reminded him of the Zulu Training Groundâ€|minus the desert, of course. The placement for the complex couldn't have been better: it was well outside the major city with two sides bordering a forest. Another side bordered a manmade lake, while the last faced the nearest outposts and towns on the way to Birmingham.

Suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted as the smaller Spartan was beside him, looking up. "Things are different, Magnus." She said. "And you do belong here. You knew long before you got back that it would take some getting used to, from everybody."

He shook his head, rolling his eyes. "Nothing is as it used to be. I worked alone, all over the place," he thought about it, trying to piece together his sentence carefully. "The only people I'm used to anymore are the spooks, and I hate them. It hasn't even been very long, but I can't remember anything else."

She shrugged, putting her hands in her pockets. "Then you need to try harder."

"Easy for you to say," he answered.

"Is it?" she asked. "I'm part snake. Blaine and Stephanie? Both cyborgs. Zeke is part fish. If you really look at it, none of us truly belongs anywhere, except with the rest of the team. You take us away from that, and of course we won't feel like we fit in. We don't." She smiled. "But, coincidentally, that's the reason we're allowed to act as we do: we're not just soldiers. We're Spartans."

Magnus shifted uncomfortably. "Can we change the subject?"

"Sure. What do you want to talk about?"

"Well, I don't know what I'd wan-"

"We could talk about the deal you made with Blaine and Ezekiel."

Magnus took a step back, dumbfounded. "Excuse me?"

Victoria rolled her eyes, crossing her arms at her chest. "I'm not stupid." She said. "The day you left, you called the two of them to speak to you alone, Ezekiel came out of the room muttering and cursing about 'stupid emotions,' and since then, the two of them have made every effort in existence to be around me during every dangerous situation."

Magnus just stood there, waiting on the words to come.

None did.

"Well?" she asked.

"Well," he said, stuttering. "Maybeâ€¦maybe they just wanted to be sure you'd be okay. Maybe they just ca-" He stopped himself. "Okay, maybe Blaine just cares."

Victoria laughed. "Ezekiel cares too. He's just not very good at showing it."

Magnus scoffed. "After everything you guys have done," he said, "he's still as big an ass as before. Blaine's the same. He runs headlong into the fray with the smallest hope of victory. And what about Landon and Jason-"

"What about them?"

"They still joke around and act like clowns on the battlefield!" He said it before the words had fully registered in his mind. And the look she gave him sent shivers all the way up his spine. "I mean," he tried to recover, but it was too late. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "You need to understand," she said dangerously. "You were missed here. You were only gone, what, not even a month and a half? But you were still sorely missed because none of us had any idea what had happened to youâ€¦what ONI was going to do to you." She paused, taking a breath. "The fact that you can come back here and criticize people who have done nothing but hope and pray for your safety isâ€¦" she stopped, and Magnus knew what was coming.

He opened his mouth to speak, but when the words wouldn't come, she finished.

"It's not the Magnus any of us remembered." She said. "And it's not the one we missed."

"The one you missed, perhaps." He said, clenching his fists slightly.

Again, she rolled her eyes. "If you really wonder if you were missed, I have a great idea: go ask. Ask anyone. They'll all tell you." She smiled widely. "Actually, on that note, I think they're all gathered in the mess hall for some of Stephanie's cooking, so let's go ask them now."

Magnus stayed put. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Victoria smiled again. "I didn't ask." She nodded her head toward the large building that was the mess hall. "Come on."

He lowered his head, and then raised it again, sighing. "Alright," he said.

Even if the feelings were different, the result was the same: Victoria could handle him without a second's warning and without an ounce of difficulty. He was still playing big brother.

\_Of course,\_ he thought, \_she did it to Zeke too, so at least I'm not alone.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Not bad for a biomechanical soldier, huh?" the female Spartan asked, looking down at her two teammates sitting at the table before her. Both nodded furiously, and kept eating.<p>

"Where the Hell did you learn to cook? We've done nothing but kill and train to kill aliens for â€" oh, I don't know â€" ever." Landon took a deep breath after his statement, and went back to engulfing the spaghetti in front of him.

Stephanie was thrilled with the reaction. Truth be told, she hadn't cooked since before she became part of Zulu Company. "I learned when I was little." She smiled, remembering. "Mom taught me."

"You neverâ€|told usâ€|you could cook." Jason said in between bites. He swallowed hard. "You should have! I'd have killed for this kind of food back in basic!"

"I'd still kill for this kind of food, if that's what it took!" Landon added, taking a bite that was five times the size of what most would consider a "human" portion and missing his mouth with half of it. His white T-shirt was suddenly less than spotless.

"Nice," Jason said, shaking his head. "This is why we never took you anywhere if we could avoid it. You're a walking disaster."

"I'm clearly sitting, thanks." Landon answered with a tone that, to all who were listening, all but screamed the word "duh."

Stephanie just laughed, turning her attention back to the kitchen. She'd taken care of lunch for these two, and also prepared steaks for Blaine and Samuel. Victoria, Magnus, and Zeke she wasn't sure of yet.

"Hey guys," she said, "what do you think Magnus would eat?"

"Get him some ONI spook," Jason joked, "he'd love to have one of those guys served up to him on a platter. The higher the rank, the bigger the tip!"

She shook her head but didn't stop smiling. "Seriously," she said. "What about Victoria, or Zeke?"

"Well, Vic I don't know about," Landon said, "but you could probably just pour Zeke the blood of small chil-" He stopped, seeing the look on her face as she looked passed him. "He's right behind me, isn't he?"

Stephanie nodded.

"Damn it." He said, turning around to see not only Zeke, but Blaine and Samuel as well. "Hi, guys." He added nervously.

"Hello Landon," Zeke growled, slapping a hand down on the other Spartan's shoulder. Then, he smirked and looked up to face Stephanie. "I'll just have a steak, if you've got a third one. Filet, please." After he said it, he immediately walked over and leaned against one wall, away from the group.

"Yeah," she said, shocked at hearing the word 'please'. "I've got one." She looked to Samuel. "Yours will be ready in just a few."

"Thanks, Steph," he answered. "That's gr-"

"Hey!" Jason said, interrupting him. "There they are!"

The rest of the group turned to watch Victoria lead Magnus a few feet into the mess hall before taking off on a dead-sprint for the group.

"Hey, look who it is!" Landon said. "You guys done chatting already?" He asked, looking for a reaction.

"What's for lunch?" She asked, ignoring him and taking a seat next to Samuel at one of the tables.

"Whatever you want," Stephanie answered.

"I'm thinkingâ€|"

"I'm thinking I'm gonna take off." Landon said suddenly, instantly earning him an echo of objections.

"Why?" Vic asked, hurt. "Are we that repulsive?"

"Well," Landon said, "maybe-"

Victoria stood up from her seat and crouched into a fighting stance. "Think about your answer carefully." She said, grinning.

"I just wanna go drive!" He yelled defensively, putting his hands up. "They've got bikes here somewhere, and I want to take one for a spin."

Jason was suddenly sitting straight up. "That sounds great." He said. "We haven't gotten to pilot anything since the Hornets in L.A."

"Well," Landon said, "there was that Longsword up in space-"

It was at that point that Samuel put down his fork and turned around. "Take it from me," he said, "if I'm ignoring my steak â€" even for a second â€" to tell you this, it's important. If you ever pull another stunt like that, your lifespan will be measured in seconds."

"Got it, Goliath," Landon said, looking to the floor, his good mood shot.

"That being said," Sam added with a serious tone, which faded instantly, "Take off! Go doâ€|whatever it is you do."

"Yes!" he shouted, instantly happy and clapping his hands. "I'm gone!"

And, sure enough, Stephanie could almost smell the trail of fire leading out of the mess hall.

"I'll go play chaperone." Jason said, standing up, "make sure he

doesn't kill himself."

"Have fun." Zeke said, still propped against a wall.

Jason nodded and walked down the length of the large room, stopping only for a second to acknowledge Magnus on his way out.

\* \* \*

><p>"Wow," Victoria said with a laugh, "talk about scaring people off. Jeez, I wouldn't have come if I knew I'd have that effect."<p>

Zeke felt the usual smirk crawling across his face. He could blame her for that, no doubt. There were a dozen comments in answer to her statement floating around in his head but, oddly enough, he didn't really care to say any of them.

"Ah, forget about it." Sam said. "You guys know, the Corporal is supposed to be out later."

Ezekiel cocked an eyebrow. He hadn't been told.

"I didn't hear anything about that!"

"Neither did I!"

"When is he coming?"

Apparently, no one else had either.

"I don't know," Sam said. "I just know he's supposed to be out this evening sometime. Until then, I guess we just pass the time like we have been." He shrugged. "That means I'm lifting."

At this, Ezekiel rolled his eyes. It was setting up to be another boring day.

"Well, I think I'm gonna take a nap, then." Blaine said, getting up. "Thanks for lunch, Steph."

"Not a problem," she said, smiling at him.

Zeke rolled his eyes again. \_Sentiment,\_ he thought, \_bleh.\_

"Don't roll your eyes." Victoria said.

\_Damn.\_

"What was that?" he asked, playing dumb. "I don't have time to listen to any more boring sentiment." The words sounded bitter, but he didn't work to suppress a smile.

"Be nice," Blaine said as he walked by. "She likes you more than I do, and you're much less of an ass to me."

"You also hold a giant, alien bludgeon on your shoulder almost every single day," Zeke pointed out. "She doesn't."

"But she's female." Blaine added, tapping him on the shoulder. "That

alone should scare the Hell out of you." With that, he walked nodded to the rest of the group and walked out.

"He's right, you know." Victoria said, walking up to him. "You could try being nice."

"I could." Zeke admitted, shrugging. "But this is so much more fun."

"What if I agree to go have a little sparring match first?" She was grinning from ear to ear, and for some reason, while it would've normally irritated him to no end, all Zeke could do was smile and shake his head. "Then will you try and be nice?"

The usual smirk reappeared in full force. "Sure." There wasn't an ounce of hesitation in his answer. "Let's go." With that, he stepped away from the wall and walked toward the door.

"You two: no killing each other before the Corporal gets here!" Sam shouted. "Comprende?"

"Yeah Sam," Zeke said, opening the door for the female Spartan behind him and following her outside.

"So," she said, looking around. "Where do you want to do this? There's open grass everywhere."

Ezekiel grinned. "Wait over there." He said, pointing to an area bordering the woods on one side. With that, he walked behind the mess hall and grabbed the two 'mock' Energy Swords that he'd been using earlier. Each one weighed roughly one-hundred-and-fifty pounds, so they were an effort to swing, but nothing maddening.

"Are you serious?" she asked when she saw him round the corner.

"Unless you can't handle it," Zeke taunted, spinning them in his hands.

"I just don't want you to strain that lung of yours." She said, smirking. "But don't worry; I'll take it easy on you." Ezekiel ignored the bait, walking over and handing her the one in his left hand.

"I'll be back in a second." He said, dropping the other. With that, he went back around the mess hall for a second time and picked up the small laptop computer that he'd left there less than two hours before.

To anyone else, it would've been funny. Ezekiel Veron had asked for only three things when the Spartans had arrived at the Birmingham Military Base: the swords, a computer with a decent audio system and a wireless connection to keep Demon busy, and some decent clothes that weren't military fatigues.

Although, to be fair, most of the others had asked for similar things to keep them occupied. Stephanie had wanted cookware. Samuel wanted an excessively large weight set. Blaine had requested a set of tools to work on his armor. Landon wanted a fast car.

Everyone had their own needs.

Although, thankfully, no one gave Landon a car.

"Oh no," Victoria protested, seeing him come back around with the computer. "You're not gonna turn that thing up to the blaring point, are you? 'Cause, you know, if you win, that'll be the only reason."

Zeke rolled his eyes and turned it on. The song \_Savin' Me\_ began to play, echoing loudly from the speakers.

"Turn that shit down!" Blaine shouted almost instantly. Zeke turned to see him walking out from the barracks.

"You just don't like it 'cause it's not new." Zeke protested.

Blaine glared at him. "Read my lips: I don't care if it's the newest music on the block or if it's a pair of cavemen bashing stones together! I don't wanna hear it when I'm taking a nap!" When no response came, he added, "and where do you get that stuff anyway? How many centuries ago was that? Five?"

"Five and a half," Zeke said proudly. "Demon's good for getting me music, if nothing else."

"Uh-huh," Blaine said calmly. Then, back to normal: "Turn it the Hell off!"

"I was here first." Ezekiel argued with a smirk. Blaine stopped.

"Don't make me kill you in front of her." He warned, motioning to Victoria. "I don't want witnesses."

"Enough!" she said finally, raising the sword. "Come on. Do you want to do this or not? You're boring me."

Zeke scoffed, but couldn't help but smile. "Boring you?" he repeated. "I'm boring you?" He laughed, raising the sword to his chest. "Well, we can't have that."

\* \* \*

><p>"Ninety-eightâ€|ninety-nineâ€|one-hun-"<p>

"So this is what you do in your spare time." The voice was Magnus'. "At least now I know why you cut the sleeves from all your shirts."

"Some of us have to work out to stay in shape," Samuel said. "We don't have the perks of being biomechanical." He grinned and stood up. And, all of a sudden, he felt like his room was terribly small in the company of another giant Spartan. Even with only a bed, a dresser, and some weights, it was still more than a little cramped.

"I was supposed to tell youâ€|" Magnus said. Then he paused, as if he were searching for the right words. "Well, really, you should just come outside and see for yourself."



Sam sighed. "Alright," he said, taking the book from the top of the dresser beside his bed. "Let's go."

With that, Magnus led him outside, into the warm, midday sun. The scene was calm, for the most part. There was a small breeze, a sense of tranquility-

"You never could race with the big boys!" Landon's voice cut through the air and Sam's consciousness like a knife. He heard it even before he recognized the sound of the Brute Chopper roaring across the landscape.

And, sure enough, Jason was right behind him, in a Chopper of his own. Samuel could only watch in horror as the giant, spiked protrusions on the wheels of the alien vehicles tore up the grass, dirt, and anything else that got in their way.

"Landon!" the giant Spartan shouted, but to no avail.  
"Jason!"

"Yeah," Magnus said, rubbing the back of his head, "I already tried that."

Samuel felt a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You didn't try shooting them, by chance, did you?" He motioned to Magnus' arms.

"What?" The other Spartan asked, taking a step back as his face was permeated with utter shock. "Are you serious?"

Sam shook his head. "No," he laughed, "I'm not serious. It'd be funny for a minute, but it's not worth the paperwork." He rolled his eyes, realizing it was futile. "Oh well," he said, "let them have their fun."

Magnus was dumbfounded again. "You're not gonna stop them? You're the leader. You're in charge!"

"I am. But, I don't really like to pull rank anywhere but on the battlefield." He shrugged and started flipping through the pages of his book, looking for a specific chapter. "I'm gonna go see what the others are up to. You coming?" Samuel turned and began to walk back around the barracks.

"Uh...sure," Magnus said, falling into step behind him.

Samuel walked around to the back of the barracks, towards the woods, and stopped, looking up from his book when he realized what he was hearing.

\_Music,\_ he thought. \_Of courseâ€¦\_

"Whatâ€¦is that?" Magnus asked cautiously. "Is thatâ€¦music?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Yeah," he said. He gave Magnus a grin, "Zeke's rockin' today."

He walked the rest of the way around and, sure enough, Zeke and Vic were in the middle of what looked like all-out-war in the grass. Each

of them was wielding one of the giant, hundred-fifty pound swords that Zeke had asked for. The male Spartan's laptop was sitting in the grass about twenty yards from them.

And they were swinging them at maddening speeds, dodging sometimes, other times blocking and denting the blades.

"What the Hell!" Magnus shouted. "What are they doing?"

Samuel just sighed. "They're sparring." He said. "You'd be surprised, but this is something that neither of them got to do much while you were gone." He watched as they continued to strike at one another furiously, waiting for an opportunity. "It looks like they missed it."

"They'll kill each other!" The other Spartan snapped. "Look at them! Aren't you going to stop them?"

Samuel's answer was a simple one as he searched for the specific verse he was looking for. "Why?" He looked up to see the two Spartans' swords locked, and Victoria appeared to have the upper hand.

"Why?" Magnus repeated. "I'll tell you why! Someone could be -"

Something cut through the air less than four feet from the other Spartan, soaring by and lodging itself into the brick wall of the barracks behind him.

It was Zeke's sword.

"Holy shit!" Magnus shouted, looking at the wall in disbelief.

"Sorry!" Zeke shouted without even turning to face them.

"He's gonna be." Magnus said. Samuel just grinned.

"You'll get used to this." He said. "It's not so bad." The giant Spartan watched as Victoria lashed out, and Zeke gripped the dull blade with both hands and spun it, ripping it from her grasp. When she let go, he grabbed it by the end and " without looking " threw it hard to his right, toward the woods. Sam followed it through the air and watched it as it stuck blade-first into a tree

" only a foot above Blaine's head.

The biomechanical Spartan had been sitting on the ground, leaning up against the tree, watching the fight and, from what Samuel could see, carving a piece of wood.

"Damn it!" He roared, standing up. "I'm gonna kick your scrawny ass, Zeke!"

"I'm sorry!" the other soldier answered. "Really, I didn't mean to!"

"Ready to intervene yet?" Magnus asked.

"No." Samuel finally settled on what he was looking for.

"Look," Magnus said finally, "I know you're the boss, but that's why you should be doing something, instead of standing by, watching. You should be taking charge."

Sam smiled. "Read this," he said, handing over the book. Magnus looked down, trying to pick out what he meant. "Read 16:32."

Magnus read it and Sam saw the words in his head. \_Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.\_

"Funny," Magnus whispered. "But not what I had in mind."

"I could easily get mad and take over the situation, but there's no reason for me to start asserting rank every chance I get, Magnus." Samuel said. "I know, as leaders go, you'd have been much sterner, much more severe in dealing with things. Maybe it would have worked better, maybe not. But, that's just not how things are here. It's not how I am."

"Fine," he said. "I'll give you Landon and Jasonâ€|they're just screwing off. But what about this?" he motioned to the two Spartans â€| unarmored and fighting full-out in the grass. "The war is over. Without any kind of armor, any protectionâ€|they could very easily kill each other."

"As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another," Samuel said, grinning. "Although, in this case, I suppose it's one Spartan."

Suddenly, Magnus lashed out with his right hand, aiming straight for the other Spartan's face. Samuel was shocked, but still managed to bring his hand up in time to grab the other soldier's fist in his hand.

"What was that?" he asked as Magnus pulled his arm back, smiling.

"Nothing. One man sharpens another, right?" Magnus laughed. "Just makin' sure you still got it."

"Oh, trust me." Sam said, "I still got it."

Magnus shook his head, but the usual glare was gone from his eyes. "You're somethin' else, you know that?"

"Well, yeah," Sam answered. "If I wasn't, how do you think I'd have put up with Blaine and Zeke and Landon all this time?"

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine awoke slowly, easily. After carving three consecutive blades from a branch on the ground, he'd grown bored with the idea and decided to make good on his earlier statement and relax. He'd sat back against the tree, closed his eyes-<p>

And Zeke had tried to impale him.

But, shortly thereafter, he'd gone back to relaxing and fallen asleep. Now, however, he could hear vehicles in the distance. That meant that either Landon and Jason were at it again, or the Corporal had finally arrived. To make matters worse, Zeke's damned music was still playing. Now it was back to his old song: \_Slow Motion.\_

He sat up and opened his eyes, blinking hard to try and wake up quicker. Zeke and Vic were toast: both of them were laying face-up in the grass, panting. Samuel and Magnus were standing with their backs to the barracks, watching. Blaine saw Stephanie enter the mess hall out of the corner of his eye.

Suddenly, the edges of a Brute Chopper became visible behind the mess hall, and Blaine found himself in autopilot: in a fraction of a second, he was standing, crouched in a fighting position, and he had pulled the mock-sword out of the tree and was holding it at chest level, ready.

Then he calmed down as Landon pulled the rest of the way around, with Jason right on his tail, completely destroying the landscape as they went.

"Guys!" one of them shouted over the roaring engines. "We've got visitors!"

Blaine smiled and planted the sword in the grass.

\_Finally.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"Long time, no see!" Landon said, walking up to Corporal Charles. A second later, he added sheepishly, "sir. Long time, no seeâ€|sir."<p>

"Forget it, Landon." Charles said with a grin. "I never gave a damn about formality before, and I wouldn't dream of taking it up with you boys now."

He watched in awe as the rest of the team slowly filed into the mess hall. For him, this was more than a short meeting. This was the first time he'd seen Zulu Company in almost two months, and the first time he'd seen them since they took down the Prophet as well.

They had a lot to talk about.

"Corporal!"

He almost didn't recognize the Spartan's voice, it had changed so much.

"Magnus!" he answered, laughing and shaking his head. "You hard-ass! You have any idea how many stories I've heard about you running circles around the folks at ONI? It's unreal." The giant Spartan saluted, and the Corporal shook his head. "The gesture is appreciated," he said, "but consider the rest of this meeting to be at ease. You guys â€" and girls â€" have shocked everyone. You can't imagine how proud I am to have been a part of this."

"So, what's the deal? Is it really over?"

Blaine: business as usual.

"It looks like it," the Corporal said. "The Arbiter returned to Earth about a week ago and gave us the details. They found the Ark and ended up activating the recreated Halo, Installation 04." He paused, taking a breath. "We still don't know where the Chief or Cortana are, but we do know that Gravemind and the rest of the Flood were eradicated, as well as the Prophet of Truth." He smiled. "It's over."

As usual, Landon was the first to respond. "Yes!"

"So that's it?" Samuel asked. "I mean, what happens now?"

Charles shrugged. "As far as I know: nothing. I've talked to the higher-ups at ONI and at HIGHCOM, and they don't seem to have much interest in Zulu Company anymore. At leastâ€|that's what they told me."

"That was my thought." Victoria said.

"So we just sit around here?" Blaine asked. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"Don't get me wrong," the Corporal answered. "I'm sure you could easily get a position anywhere. God knows you're more than qualifiedâ€|all of you are. But, just relax for a little bit first, for me. Sit back, revel in the peace." He sighed, looking up at the clear skies. "It's been too long."

\* \* \*

><p>Victoria sighed. The meeting had gone well, but had long since passed. Less than two hours after he arrived, the Corporal had a flight to make, although he'd promised to return as soon as he got the opportunity.<p>

Then the group had returned to the outdoors and made a decent campfire out in a patch of dirt behind the mess hall. For quite a while, they sat around, chatting almost as if that was what they were born to do.

As if that was what they were made to do.

Sometime later, however, the sun had dropped from the sky to be replaced by the moon and countless stars. Blaine was first: he had called it a night and returned to the barracks. Landon left shortly thereafter. Stephanie followed, and then Jason as well, until four Spartans remained around the fire.

And then Ezekiel had announced that he'd "had all the fun he could take for one day," and proceeded to get up and walk aimlessly around the base.

That had been thirty minutes before. Since then, Victoria had spent her time listening to Magnus talk about Blaine and Jason removing the Fuel Rods in the back of his arms and the AI before fixing the system. From what he'd said, it had all been a piece of cake for

them, which made Victoria trust ONI even less.

Something that simple, that easy to fix—that was no accident. They didn't have a 'mistake' in his armor. They had planted it there.

"Apparently," Magnus said, "between Blaine tweaking his own armor and Jason learning to repair all the shit that Landon trashes by driving like a maniac, I was in better hands than I thought."

Samuel nodded from the other side of the fire. "No doubt in my mind," he said. "They have their moments — especially Landon — but they're good at what they do."

Victoria yawned and stood up. "I'll see you guys tomorrow." She said. "I'm beat. If I didn't know better, I'd say Ezekiel was trying to kill me earlier."

"He might have been," Magnus laughed. "I wouldn't put it passed him."

"Night, Vic," Sam said. "See you tomorrow."

"Yeah," Magnus repeated, "good night."

She smiled and turned away, walking back to the barracks. She rounded the corner of the mess hall and stopped suddenly, grinning wide.

"If you want to sneak up on me," she said, "you're gonna need to mask that disgusting scent of yours." For some reason, she took a lot of pleasure in the last part of that statement.

"Ouch," he answered quietly. "Sorry, I was just walking, and I saw you coming by, so I thought I'd give you a quick scare."

"Nice try," she said.

"I'll do better next time." He said. Then, randomly, he started laughing under his breath.

"What?" she asked. "What's so funny?"

He stopped as quickly as he started. "It's just different, that's all." He said. "I mean—is this what peace feels like?"

Victoria smiled. "I think so."

"Have to admit, it feels pretty good," he said. "Night, Vic."

She turned around to say good night but, as usual, he'd disappeared again. Victoria rolled her eyes and let her mind wander back to the day. Between the talk with Magnus, the food, the sparring—more sparring—the Corporal's visit, and the campfire, they'd all had a lot of firsts.

She just couldn't believe it. The Covenant: gone. The Prophets: killed. The Flood: eradicated.

It was over.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: So, that was it! Be sure to leave a review and tell me what you all thought. I know, a little different, and something new, but I hope it turned out okay. Now, that all being said, I have a WARNING for everyone:<strong>

\*\* - - - If you liked the happy ending, if you liked the little bit of sunshine, that little tidbit of happiness...STOP READING NOW. Leave a review, treat this as the end of the story. Don't get me wrong, the next segment is my best one yet...but it's not gonna be a happy one. If you didn't get the daily dose of happiness you needed...read it again. The Flood are on their way, and, as you know, that means Hell is coming with them. - - -\*\*

\*\*You have been warned.\*\*

\*\*Thanks everyone, and enjoy the last segment! Hope to hear from you!\*\*

## 51. Chapter 50: ONI Returns

\*\*Author's Notes: I know, it's been a while. I'm doing the best I can. I've had exams, projects, papers, meetings...and a variety of other things destroying my time. So, this is the first time I've gotten a real chance to write, and I got a whole chapter done basically in a day. It's not great, but it's a start, and I hope you all enjoy it. Now, first, reviews!\*\*

\*\*REVIEWS:\*\*

\*\*Samson00: Hey man! Thanks for all your help and proofing this one for me! I know there's not much action, but you know the drill, lol. You and I both know the truth: this segment is gonna be great, if I ever get around to typing it...thanks again for everything.\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: Yeah, Sam's got what it takes. He shows it subtly most times, simply because, well, he's just that good, lol. As for the team...they all kind of did their own thing, as you saw and stated. Victoria...she didn't ask for much, just the bare minimum for Gael and such. And, in regards to your question...I intend to bring the Flood in soon. And yes, there will be Covies again, though I will not say when. Sorry man. Thanks for reviewing for me! Sorry for the short response...still got homework to do tonight and I want to get this out there.\*\*

\*\*0756: Sorry! Yeah, it was meant to be implied that it's him, as he's the only one that ever really plays that game. But yeah, you're right about that. Thanks a lot for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: Hey! Glad you liked the "happy ending," lol. More so, I really hope you like what's coming. Thanks for your compliment on the writing...as well as your review. I'm gonna hit 600 yet!\*\*

\*\*i-kill-jackals: There is one segment left in this book (this one). The sequel will be my next real work. I haven't decided on Magnus' tale. I might actually just incorporate it into this and the sequel.

We shall see. Thank you for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*bashbro: Why thank you! I hope that, if I publish it...I'll be the first to get a copy, lol. ;) Thanks!\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Well, I know it took a while...but my next one is up. And it only gets (much) better from here. Thanks a lot for your review!\*\*

\*\*Benaia Dre: Wow...you never cease to flatter me, lol. I do appreciate all of your compliments, and I just hope that it's all as good as everyone claims that it is. I'm glad that people can come and read this, and expect something good...and then actually deliver on it. Thanks for reviewing, and I hope you like what's coming!\*\*

\*\*vernox: I hope I can really do a good job on the Flood after all I've said...I kind of backed into a corner. Now I think if I bomb it I'll have people ready to kill me, lol. But, I think it'll all work. As for the Stalker Forms and such...you'll just have to wait and see. Thanks a lot for your review, and I hope you enjoy this chapter!\*\*

\*\*Woodzyl4: About Magnus' armor: the errors were intentionally placed to control him, and were easily removed with anyone that had any real expertise in the matter. That's all. Thank you very much for your compliment, and I hope you enjoy the next segment! Thanks for reviewing also!\*\*

\*\*Mhop12: I LOVE your analogy, lol. It made my day. As for the next segment...I don't know. You'll have to keep reading. I give no guarantees to anything. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Samus 117: Hey! Been a while since I talked to you! Sorry...been busy. But I'm glad you liked the "happy ending," and I hope you enjoy what's on the way. And as I've said, I do not guarantee any deaths of characters, but I will also refrain from promising that they all live. So...you'll all just have to wait and see. Thanks for your review!\*\*

\*\*Lecter42: Glad you liked the last two chapters as well. And it was good to hear that the Elites weren't "overkill," as I wondered how that would be received. But, good news, good news. And I don't know about "best chapter," but the fact that you really liked it means that I couldn't have done too badly, lol. So thank you very much! And thanks for your two reviews! That helps me greatly. I'm getting to 600, dang it! ;) \*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: I have plenty planned for them, no doubt about that! Sorry to hear that you'll be busy on Fable...but, enjoy the game. My good friend Samson00 also has been playing, and he seems to be enjoying it. Thanks much for reviewing, and I hope you'll read on!\*\*

\*\*The Great Valley Guardian: You're right! This is not the end of them! Not by a longshot! I intend to look at your next chapter this weekend or early next week...but I have been COMPLETELY swamped these last few weeks, so I do apologize. Thank you for your review, and I hope to hear from you again soon!\*\*



**\*\*hellhoundcerbers:** Glad you liked the last one! Also, I hope you like the Flood when they finally make their appearance. I'm telling you...it's gonna be one for the record books! Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*JadeJin-Obil:** Hello to a new reader! And I applaud you for sitting through my entire story in a few days...that's a lot of reading. I know...I proofed it all at least twice. ;) And you were right about the paintball comment (good call!). And the Flood will be introduced, but High Charity was destroyed on the Ark, so I wasn't able to use that (unfortunately). But we'll just have to see how it goes! Thanks for your (multiple) reviews, and I hope you'll continue to read for me!\*\*

**\*\*That's all for reviews!** Thanks to everyone who did, and I hope you like this next chapter. I warn you: not much action. Lots of dialogue...my typical "setup" chapter. But, you know how it is. Also, I'll do my best to post next week...pending any more evil college projects, lol.\*\*

**\*\*NOW, on to the big number FIFTY! WOOOH!!!\*\***

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 50:<strong>

â€" **\*\*ONI Returns** â€"

**\*\*1600 Hours - March 15, 2553\*\***

**\*\*Birmingham Military Base - Outside Spartan Barracks\*\***

Ezekiel scowled as the mock sword cut through the air an inch above where his head had just been. He leapt backwards as the Spartan in front of him kept swinging, clearly enjoying the fact that she could strike without any real fear of retaliation.

He silently cursed himself for his arrogance in telling the female that he didn't need a sword to fight with "the likes of her."

The sword came again, and he dodged to left as it fell straight down and narrowly missed his shoulder. Before Victoria could bring it back up, he'd stepped on it with his boot.

"I think you've had enough fun." He said. She grinned.

"Aw," she said, "I'm just getting warmed up!" She spun the sword sideways, throwing him off of it, and began swinging again, smiling from ear to ear.

"You know you could really hurt somebody with that!" Zeke protested, backing up and ducking low to avoid another strike. "Seriously-"

He stopped cold. Something didn't feel right. He could hear something on the road, and it wasn't a standard issue Warthog or the Choppers that Jason and Landon had been driving around. And he smelled something too.

She swung at him again, bringing the sword straight toward his chest, but Ezekiel reached out with his right hand and caught it by the dull blade. It ripped a hole in his fingerless glove and sent a shockwave all the way up his arm, but the motion served its purpose: Victoria suddenly let go of the sword, watching the road as he was.

"What is it?" she asked. "I recognize that soundâ€|but I can't place it."

Zeke swallowed hard. "Go inside." He said coldly, but she shook her head.

"I'm not going anywhere." She protested. "What's that sou-"

She stopped as the first of the black-colored vans rounded the corner of the base, pulling off the road and driving slowly toward them.

"Oh no," she said. "Not again."

"Go inside." Zeke said again. "Get Samuel."

She started to oblige, but was stopped cold as the first van parked twenty feet away, in the middle of the grass. The other two stayed well behind, parking only a few meters from the road.

"Stop!" a single, black-armored soldier shouted as he came from the back. Immediately behind him was another â€" almost identical â€" soldier. And behind them both was a highly decorated officer.

\_No doubt from the deepest bowels of ONI\_, Zeke thought.

"If you're looking for Magnus," Ezekiel said coldly, "I'll take you to him. I'm sure he'd be all-too-happy to see you guys."

"We're not here for that one." The officer said. "We're here for-"

"I didn't catch your name." Zeke growled.

"That's because I didn't give it to you."

Ezekiel grinned. "Sorry, I'm a bit old-fashioned. I believe in knowing who I'm talking to. Now, let's try the pleasantries again, shall we?" He paused. "I'm Ezekiel 'if-you-test-me-I'll-kill-you' Veron. And you are?"

The man rolled his eyes. "I'm Commander Black. I work for ONI."

"Big shocker there," Zeke growled. He turned to Vic. "You need to go get Samuel. I need him here."

"She's not going anywhere, because she's-" Black started.

"Oh," Zeke said, taking a step toward him, "you really don't want to finish that sentence. Because, if it ends like I think it does, you and I are going to have a serious problem."

"Watch yourself," the soldier on the Commander's left said, glancing toward his sidearm. Ezekiel rolled his eyes.

"Unless you want your twin over there to have to pull that out of your ass," he said, "I suggest you just sit back and let the grown-ups talk right now."

"Enough," Black said, nodding to the soldier. "We're here for the female. Like or not, she is coming with us."

"Over my dead body," Zeke growled, staring him in the eye, "and yours."

"Zeke," she said, "that's enough. Get ba-"

"What's going on over here?" another voice echoed from the door to the barracks. Zeke glanced over to see Magnus walking up to them.

"Oh, not much," he said, "just ONI here to take Victoria away and use her as a lab mouse." He paused, then added, "the usual."

Magnus' demeanor changed in a flash. Before Zeke could even react, the larger Spartan was behind him, between the soldiers and Victoria, his hands clenched at his sides.

"Oh, Magnus," Black said coolly, "have you forgotten your training already?" He laughed wickedly. "Take the girl. Bring her to the van."

"Burn in Hell," Magnus said.

The Commander shrugged. "Not the answer I was hoping for," he said, pulling out a small device. Ezekiel watched vigilantly for a gun from any of them, but none came. Finally, Black pressed a button, and Magnus fell to his knees.

"Magnus!" Victoria was with him in a second, trying to figure out what was wrong as the giant Spartan shook and gripped his forearms. "What did you do to him?"

"What's wrong, Magnus?" Black growled. "Remember yet?"

"Oh, I do." The giant Spartan said suddenly, standing up. Zeke grinned.

He was fine.

"What?" Black nearly tripped over himself backing up. "How-"

"I have a couple of friends who fixed all the little bugs your wonderful institution was kind enough to install." Magnus laughed. "Now, I'll say this once: get the Hell off this base."

At this, the Commander reached for his sidearm, as did the two soldiers guarding him. Before they could even complete the motions, each of the two grunts had one of Magnus' giant hands pointed directly at their heads, and Ezekiel had gripped the Energy Sword from his thigh, activated it, and was holding it dangerously close to the Commander's throat.

"One false move," Magnus growled, no doubt speaking to the soldiers,

"and you'll be nothing but a pair of legs."

"And they're the lucky ones." Zeke snapped, looking at the Commander.

"Listen to me!" Black said, backing up a few inches. "If you don't hand her over, we will take her by force!"

"Try that, and you'll leave here in a body-bag." Zeke said. Then he corrected himself, "make that several body-bags." He said, turning the sword slightly.

"You're not going to stop us." Black protested. "We have the authority! We have the influence! ONI has the power here, not you!"

"Your friends have two mounted cannons pointed directly at their heads and you've got a sword an inch from your throat." Zeke snarled, "how do you spell 'influence,' Commander?"

\* \* \*

><p>"Hey!" Samuel roared, leading the rest of the team that was present out into the grass after Stephanie had just informed him as to what was going on. Landon and Jason were out on a road-trip to somewhere, but the rest of the team was right behind him. "Hey!" he shouted again. "That's enough!" All he could see were two of his Spartans with their weapons drawn and threatening three other humans.<p>

"Samuel," Victoria said as he walked up. "They're from ONI."

"I don't care." He turned to the other two. "Arms down, now!"

"Fine," Zeke growled, deactivating the sword. Magnus didn't move.

"Magnus," Sam said, "I meant arms literally as well."

With that, he put his arms at his sides.

But the ONI soldiers only further drew their weapons, taking aim at the Spartans. "You will hand her over to us now," the officer in the middle said, "or I will make sure that you are charged with assaulting a superior officer!"

"Oh trust me," Zeke said, "if I go down for something, it'll be for killing a superior officer."

"Zeke," Sam growled. "Settle, now." He turned to the soldiers from ONI. "I'm Samuel King. Who are you and what do you want?"

"I am Commander Black of ONI, and I'm here for the female, Victoria Small." He paused. "Hand her over now. We have documentation to approve her being relocated."

"She's not going anywhere." Blaine said, stepping forward. "The war is over. You've all had your fun. Now take a hike."

"I won't say it again." Black said. "Give her to us now, or someone's gonna die." He flicked the safety off on the pistol in his hand.

"My bet is that it'll be you." Blaine said.

At that moment, another van pulled around the corner of the base.

"Oh, what now?" the Commander growled, turning around. The van pulled up beside his, and the passenger got out. Samuel squinted.

The man was dressed in a suit and tie, but not the traditional all-black that ONI was known for. It was a dark blue, and the man was actually smiling.

"Hey!" he shouted, putting his hands up as he saw the Commander. "Woah-woah-woah. There's no need for that! Put those away!" He laughed as he got closer.

The Commander started, "I will not--"

"Put 'em down, Black." The man said. "For God's sake, get back in your van. I'll take care of this." The Commander muttered something under his breath and turned to leave. "And take your friends too." He motioned to the two soldiers.

"Who the Hell is that?" Stephanie whispered.

"I am so sorry!" the man said, stepping forward. "That man's a bit of a beast before he's had his coffee." He sighed, "a real shame, really. Name's Rex," he said, "Rex Sauter."

\* \* \*

><p>"You work for ONI too?" Stephanie questioned, though it sounded more like a statement to Magnus.<p>

"Well, yes and no," Rex said with a smile. "Technically yes, as my boss is a higher-up in the bounds of ONI, but also no in that I'm not a ranked officer."

"Tell your boss," Magnus said, looking down on the man who looked pitifully small from his eleven-foot vantage point, "that he's not taking Victoria, or any Spartan from this base, period."

"Now-now," Rex said, "let's not get too hasty. First of all, you guys don't trust me, or any of us at ONI. I get that. I understand that. You have no reason to. You've been exploited, lied to, and sent on missions that â€" by all rights â€" should never have been approved in the first place." He paused. "I get that."

"Yet you're still here," Zeke growled.

"Listen to me," he said, "I want us to get along. My boss sent this as kind of a peace-offering." He pulled out a manila folder and handed it to Samuel, who had since stepped to the front of the group.

"Is this--" he started, but Rex finished.

"That is the full, complete file on Magnus Daniels. In that folder is every detail ONI ever hid from him or your team. Also included, in the back, is a signed release form by my boss, Cassandra Rose." He paused, then turned to Magnus. "My friend," he said, "you will never be forced to go anywhere against your will again. I give you my word."

"In return," Magnus said, "you just want Victoria."

"Please," Rex said, "let me explain-"

"There's no need for an explanation!" Blaine said. "The answer is no."

"Damn right it is." Zeke echoed.

"Spartans," Samuel said lowly, "enough. You do not have to agree with anything he says, but you will show Mr. Sauter the respect he's shown thus far. Do you understand?"

"Got it."

"Yes."

"Damnable spooks."

"Zeke!"

"Fine."

With that, Sauter continued. "I know that, after what Magnus here went through, you have no reason to trust us, even a little. But you have to know this: this is not another damned science fair project by ONI. This is for her safety."

Magnus felt himself calm slightly. It was involuntary though. He still wanted nothing more than to blow the man's head off.

"My safety?" Victoria asked. "What are you talking about?"

Rex sighed. "Our leading scientist recently found a potential problem in the snake DNA that was injected into your system. Because of the conflicting nature of the snake's senses, the idea that they "see" heat, the DNA will "in the next two weeks" begin to eat away at your own eyesight." He paused. "I'm not a techie, so I can't explain it to you very well, but the gist of it is that you'll go blind within a month."

"What?" She said, stepping back. "I can't go blind. I'd be completely useless."

"None of this is true." Magnus said as he shook his head. "Stop listening to him!"

"Look!" Rex continued. "I'm not asking you to trust me."

"You're asking us to take you on your word." Zeke said. "That's the same thing."

Samuel waved his hand to the smaller Spartan, signaling for him to be

quiet. "The war is over," he said. "Why does your organization have one care as to what happens to her, or any of us?" Rex started to answer, but Sam stopped him. "And don't tell me it's out of the goodness of your hearts."

"Not the organization's," Rex said, "but that of my boss. Ms. Rose has never approved of the tasks and tests that you as a group were put through, but she's not high enough on the ladder to have any kind of real say in it." He looked at Victoria. "Those highest on the ladder wanted to let you rot. My boss put her word, her recommendation, every ounce of political pressure she could to get us out here to you. She put her whole reputation on the line."

"You're lying." Zeke said, though now completely calm, with his arms crossed at his chest.

"I am most-certainly not." Rex said. "Ms. Rose is a caring human being, but she's no pushover. Because her reputation is on the line, she will not take 'no' for an answer. If you refuse to come with me, she'll send soldiers to get you by force." He waited, and then added, "and there will be casualties."

"No doubt-" Blaine started, but Sauter cut him off.

"No doubt from our organization." He said. "I know. Trust me, I know that the eight of you are more than a match for anything that we can send out. We'd suffer insane casualties, and for nothing. But, in turn, you become outlaws, villains, criminals to be hunted down and either imprisoned or executed. And nobody wants that, especially not after everything you've done for this world." He shook his head. "Nobody wants that."

"Enough," Victoria said. "I'll go."

"What?" Magnus shouted. "You can't be serious!"

Zeke was close behind. "Don't be absurd!"

"He's lying!" Blaine said.

"I said that's enough!" she yelled, clenching her fists. "He's right. If we fight now, we fight later. If we fight later, we spend the rest of our lives living like criminals. I know you're willing to risk it," she turned to Magnus, "and I appreciate it, but I'm not. I'm not going to sentence you to that. I'm going with him."

Samuel intervened. "If she goes," he said, "I go."

"Excuse me?" Rex asked.

"If you take her, you will take me, and I will watch her."

"Sam," Zeke yelled, "if anyone is going-"

"It very certainly will not be you." Samuel said. He turned to Victoria. "Okay?"

She nodded, then looked at Rex. "How long will this surgery take?"

"It's non-invasive," he said. "It's mostly antibiotics and drugs, very little actual mechanical work. And we really only need about twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-four hours?" Magnus asked. "And why exactly can't you just do it here?"

"Well," Sauter said, "as you know, ONI is known for heavy, expensive machinery. My boss had enough pull to get your friend in, but not to get those machines to go anywhere else."

"So, how long does that take in all?"

"It's Tuesday now," Rex said. "I'll have her back to you by Friday. Give me seventy-two hours."

"I'll get my stuff." Victoria said, and she turned and left for the barracks.

Samuel turned to Stephanie. "Go with her." He said. She nodded and left.

"I promise you," Rex said, "it'll be fine."

Magnus gritted his teeth, and was somewhat surprised to see Samuel's fists clenched just as hard at his sides.

"Come back in two hours." Sam told the spook. "We'll both be ready. Until then â€" and I'm saying this once â€" get off this base, right now."

Rex put his hands up like a gun was pointed at him. "Woah," he said, "you got it. If that's what you want, I'll give you your time. I'll be back in a few hours."

\* \* \*

><p>Victoria entered her room and slammed the door shut behind her, breathing so hard she worried that she'd hyperventilate.<p>

"What's wrong?" Gael's voice sounded from the laptop computer in the corner. When she didn't answer, the AI asked again. "Hey," she asked sympathetically, "what is it?"

"ONI came back." Victoria said coldly, getting out a large bag.

"Not again," Gael said. "They can't take you again."

"They already have." She said. "There's no choice. Either I go, or they come back later, and they bring soldiers."

"And we have our own little war," Gael said.

"Yeah," Vic said, now more angry than she was scared. "It's not fair. Why can't they just leave us alone?"

"They're parasites," Gael answered. Victoria was about to speak again when someone knocked on the door.

"It's open." She said, and Stephanie walked in.



"Anything I can do?" she asked.

"Yeah," Vic said, "I'm gonna need witnesses for my will."

"Stop that." Stephanie said. "Samuel will be there. He won't let anything happen to you."

Victoria shook her head furiously. "What makes you think he'll be able to do one damned thing if they decide to? You don't think they have the power to separate us, send him home, kill him, if they so decide?"

Stephanie said nothing.

"His coming is a nice gesture, but it won't amount to anything if they're lying, which I'm sure they are. My eyes are fine. But Sauter's right: if we fight back, we risk everything."

"We could call the Corporal." Stephanie said, more as a question than a suggestion.

"Why? So that he can get involved, get furious, and have his hands tied as he always has. He loves us as a groupâ€|but he's low-ranked. The spooks at ONI would laugh in his face."

"So that's it then? You're just gonna go?"

"I have no choice." She answered. "It's for the team. It's the only option."

"You know the rest of us are gonna have a field-day with ONI if they try anything, right?" Stephanie said with a slight grin, "especially Magnus."

"And Ezekiel too," Vic said, "and Blaine. I know you all would come to the rescue at a moment's notice. That's the only thing that's keeping me sane right now. The one chance that they won't try anything depends on the fact that they don't want to risk the rest of you going rogue."

"Personally, just Zeke or Blaine going rogue would be enough to convince me. Those two scare me when they're pissed."

"They're not so bad." Victoria said, smiling. "Hard-asses, no doubt about thatâ€|but not all bad."

Stephanie laughed. "And what about Magnus?" she asked. "He'd sell his soul to keep you out of harm's way."

"He's different since he got back." Victoria answered. "But I know what you mean. Magnus will always try to be the big brother. That's just how he is."

There was suddenly another knock at the door, followed by, "got a second?"

It was Samuel.

"Yeah," Victoria said. "Sure."

He walked in, ducking low to avoid the border of the door. "You've got two hours until Rex gets back. Magnus is waiting down the hall for when you get a moment. But, don't forgetâ€¦the rest of the team all wants to talk to you as well."

"Are you still-"

"I'm still coming with you." Sam said. "Don't worry."

Victoria smiled. "Thank you."

"No problem." He motioned to Stephanie. "Come on," he said, "let's go."

"See ya, Vic," Stephanie said, and followed him out.

\* \* \*

><p>"How is she?" Magnus asked Samuel as he and Stephanie passed him. Samuel smiled slightly.<p>

"She'll be alright." He said. "You can go see her now."

Magnus nodded and left immediately, all but running down the hall.

"You really think you can protect her if you go with her?" Stephanie asked him. Samuel took a deep breath, the truth painfully obvious in his mind.

"No," he said. "If they put their resources into forcibly taking her, there'll be nothing I can do to stop them. But I'll die before I let them do it without a fight." He paused. "Let's just hope that's not what they want in the first place."

Stephanie shook her head. "You know it is."

"Look," Samuel said, feeling his rage toward the spooks bubbling just below the surface. "If there was any other way, you know I'd take it. Any other way. But there isn't. She's not willing to let the team go down for her. Could I? Yes. Magnus? Of course he would. Even Zeke would be more than happy to die fighting. But she's not willing to risk them, or us. She would rather subject herself to anything ONI can throw at her than let us go down for her." He paused. "That's her choice, and there's nothing I can do about that."

"Well," Stephanie said, "let's just hope that it's just a surgery then." She looked passed the giant Spartan as they walked outside. "In the meantime," she added, "you've got some not-so-pleasant company."

Samuel turned to see Blaine walking toward him.

"And he looks pissed," she said. "See you later." With that, she left, disappearing behind a corner of the barracks.

"Look," Sam said, "before you say anyth-"

"You're letting them take her!" He shouted. "Have you lost your mind?"

You know what they did to her last time. They'll kill her for sure this time!"

"Blaine-

"No! They came into our lives like vultures years ago, and we gave up everything to become their saviors, their "supersoldiers," and now, after we were willing to sacrifice everything for their cause, they're back! They're back, because they're a nothing more than parasites, and they won't stop until we take a stand!"

"Listen to me," Samuel said bitterly, stepping toward the smaller Spartan. "I know exactly what you're saying. I agree with you. But this is not a choice. This is not a choice for us to make." He paused. "This was her choice to make, and she made it for all of us. Now you have to respect that, or it's all for nothing."

"I don't have to respect shit." Blaine said. "The war is over, but they're still conducting their little projects and we're still their little toys. I'm done with that, and if you let them take Vic, they'll come for one of us next. And then the next, and then the next. They'll never stop, until each of us is dead. And mark my words: that's how this all ends. We die."

"Not if I can say anything about it," Samuel said.

"You could have," Blaine said, "and you didn't." And he walked into the barracks.

Samuel looked up to the sky. "Why?" he asked. "Why now? After everything that we've been through, that she's been through, why now?"

"Because that's how life works."

"Not exactly an answer from God." Samuel said with a grin.

"Hey, I'm as close as you're gonna get in this life."

Sam rolled his eyes. "I suppose you want to lay into me too?" He turned to face Zeke, ready. "Go ahead. Take your shot."

"Not at all," he said. "You did what you had to do. And, for that matter, she made her own choice. I don't agree with it. I think it's about asinine, but it's the choice she made. She is willing to give herself up for the rest of us. It's no different than what we'd have done on the battlefield."

"So then why do I feel like the bad guy?" Samuel asked with a laugh.

"Because everyone's looking for one," Zeke said. "They can't blame Vic. They want to blame ONI, but it never gets us anywhere, so they turned to you." He shook his head. "You have to understand, Sam—we always turned to you for an answer. We always looked to you for a plan. This time, there isn't a plan. There is no 'way out.' We can't win. And, as expected, everybody's pissed."

"It's not fair." Samuel said, clenching his fists. "I'd trade her places in a second."

"So would I. Hell, I'd trade you places--"

"Absolutely not," Samuel said. "Not in a million years."

"Oh, come on." Zeke said. "You know the thought of me in an ONI base is one for the books."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, "but then there is absolutely no chance that either of you will get out without casualties. At least, with me going, there's a slim one."

"You know as well as I do that Sauter's a lying bastard."

Samuel nodded.

"I'm telling you this now, Sam." Zeke said. "And you can pretend to have never heard it if it makes your life easier, but it's the truth. If Rex Sauter does not return with Victoria in three days' time, I will find him, and I will kill him. His death will not be quick, and it will be excruciatingly painful. I will make sure of that."

"And then what?" Samuel asked, furious at the idea. "Then you spend the rest of your life as a criminal?"

"Odds are," Zeke said, "if she dies up there, my lifespan will be measured in days shortly thereafter. ONI has done more than enough. The war is over. Humanity no longer needs me, or us, for that matter." He scowled, pulling out the Energy Sword at his thigh. "I'm telling you now: if you or Victoria does not return, I will kill every last God-damned one of them."

"You're right," Sam said, "I'm gonna pretend I never heard that."

Zeke shrugged. "Whatever helps you sleep at night."

"You need to go see Vic." Samuel said, suddenly very serious.

"Me?" he asked. "What the Hell for?"

"Don't be stupid. Just do it." He looked down at his teammate, who was staring up at him with a bitter expression. "That's an order."

"It's under protest."

"No it's not." Samuel said. "Go."

Zeke scoffed loudly, grinned, and went into the barracks, leaving Samuel alone outside once again.

"This isn't right." He said to himself. "She's been through so much already. There's no reason to put her through any more."

He looked up at the clear sky, wondering how things had changed so much. \_Please, \_he prayed, \_if there is any other wayâ€|any other way at all, help me find it.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Two hours later, the Spartans were gathered outside as two of the pitch-black vans returned to the base. Rex stepped out of the closest one.<p>

"Alright," he said with a smile. "Are we ready?"

"Yeah," Victoria said emotionlessly. "Let's go."

"We'll be back in a few days." Samuel said, turning to the group. "Be sure to explain everything to Landon and Jason when they get back."

"No problem," Stephanie said. "We will. You just take care of yourselves."

"They'll be fine!" Rex laughed. "I promise ya-"

"I've heard enough out of you!" Blaine roared suddenly. "They're going with you because there's no other choice, not because of you. If I had my way-"

"Blaine!" Samuel snapped.

"I'm not done," he growled. "This son of a bitch doesn't give a damn what happens to anyone here, and neither does his boss!"

"That's enough." Samuel said. "This is how it has to happen. Now accept it and move on."

Blaine said nothing, only crossed his arms and mumbled something foul.

Zeke watched as Magnus walked up to Victoria. "Take good care of yourself." He said. "We'll be waiting for you when you get back."

"Thanks," she said. She glanced to Ezekiel, but he quickly turned away, refusing to look at her.

He didn't trust Rex as far as he could spit, and he knew where this scenario was going to lead: straight to death.

"Alright," Sauter said, "if you two will just pile in the van, I'll drive."

"Hold it." Zeke said, more on impulse than anything. "You and I need to have a word."

"Oh?" Rex said as the two Spartans departed. "I can do that. Not gonna kill me are ya?" He said with a laugh.

Ezekiel's expression was stone-cold. "Haven't decided," he said plainly. He walked up to Rex.

"What's on your mind, sport?" he asked.

"Cut the crap." Zeke growled. "You and I both know that you're lying through your teeth." The man started to speak, but was cut off. "I'm warning you now: if the two of them are not back here in seventy-two

hours, for any reason, I will hunt you down like the dog you are, and I will kill you."

"I'm sorryâ€|that sounded like a threat." Rex said carefully.

"Not at all," Zeke snarled, "that is a promise." He scowled. "Now get the Hell out of here, before I get really pissed. And," he added, "if that happens, I'll be mailing little pieces of you back to ONI."

"Whatever you say, sport." Sauter said with a wicked smile. Then, he turned, and moved back to the van. Seconds later, Ezekiel watched as the team's leader and his rival vanished behind the wall of the base.

At that second, he felt the control he'd worked so hard to maintain slipping away. He instantly walked into the barracks, and then into his room. He locked the door behind him, and threw his fist into the concrete wall. He did it onceâ€|twiceâ€|three times.

He did it again and again, for what seemed like hours, until he lost count, until he finally punched a clean hole all the way through the wall.

And instantly he wished that he hadn't.

He stopped punching and looked through the hole in horror. Beyond it was a room with a bed about the size of his own, a set of mock swords, a laptop computerâ€|

Unable to contain it any longer, he faced the ceiling and yelled at the top of his lungs. His hatred for ONI, fear for the future, and anger toward the female Spartan for making the choice she had made bubbled to the surface, and the normally-stoic Spartan, for the first time in his life, was reminded of just how human they all were.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Okay, so that's it. I know, not nearly long enough for my hiatus...but it's all I can do. I've had projects and exams and papers galore...and I could just keel over. But, for now...this is the beginning of the next segment.<strong>

**\*\*Also, and this is IMPORTANT:\*\***

**\*\*I am considering introducing a brand new character to sort of "join" the team in the next segment. I want to know if anyone thinks that this is a good idea and, if it is, what kind of personality would you all like to see? Is there one that you think perhaps I'm missing? Please note, I doubt that it will happen, but it's an idea, and I just want everyone's feedback. Thanks all, and I hope you'll review for me!\*\***

**\*\*Adios!\*\***

## 52. Chapter 51: The Final Struggle

**\*\*Author's Notes: Took me a while, I know. At least it wasn't as long as last time. I'm doing my best. I've got 3 major assignments due**

this week, with the possibility that I might get to go home this weekend. Regardless of all that, I'm going to try to get another of these up before the end of the week. This one and the next will be kind of short (cut off for material-purposes more so than anything else). But, moving on...Reviews!\*\*

**\*\*REVIEWS:\*\***

**\*\*Samson00:** Well, there's not much I can tell you about anything anymore, lol. You proof almost everything for me (thank you...much...). I'd comment on the character ideas, but I figure we'll just wait and see what sticks. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*vernox:** Hey! Well...I took everyone's ideas for new characters and I haven't decided what I'm going to do just yet, but I've got options open. As for Victoria, I know I've been pretty secretive both about her and what Magnus went through as well. Most of the details will be discovered in the sequel, rather than in this book, but I promise to give you something before it's over. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*i-kill-jackals:** lol, glad you liked the chapter and the possibility of someone new. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*Mhop12:** I loved that analogy...lol. It made me laugh. That aside...time to see if you won your bet or not. ;) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*0756:** I appreciate the input on the new characters. I'm telling you now, you'll see some new faces, but I intend to have them serve minor roles for a while. Just wanted to leave some options open. And look! I didn't make you wait...quite...as long. I'm tryin', lol. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*Lord Zander:** Thanks for the compliments and input on any new characters. Hope you like what's coming, and thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey! Thanks for all your input and compliments. We talked some a while ago, and I'll be checking the site again...alas, I've been a little swamped as of...the last month. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*WolfyWolf:** Hey, thank you for the compliment. As with everyone, I took what you said about a new character and worked some with it. I've got some new faces up ahead...everyone will have to tell me what they think. Thanks, and I can't wait for this longer review! ;)\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Thanks for your compliments on the last chapter. I also looked at what you said about the new character, and I think you'll find I liked your idea. ;) Took a little twist with it, but...basic premise is there. Thanks very much for your review!\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Hey, glad you liked this last chapter. As for all the havoc...well...you'll just have to read on. And, just so you know...I hate ONI too. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*Bashbro:** Thank you very much! Hope you didn't wait too long...**\*\***

**\*\*JadeJin-Obil:** Yeah...I fixed that typo, finally. Good catch... ;) And I agree fully with your take on ONI. Cancer is a good word. As for a character death...well, no promises. Thanks for your review!**\*\***

**\*\*Woodzyl4:** Thanks. As for Rex...part of the mystery is for you guys to figure it out over time. Sorry...don't want to give much away. Thanks for your review, sorry I couldn't tell you more.**\*\***

**\*\*KrystalIceKitsune:** Hey! Always good to have someone new reading! As for your question...I purposely stay away from their ranks on account of...I don't know what to call them. I know the Master Chief ascended into the ranks during his campaign, but I don't know exactly what I would call Zulu Company. Sorry I can't be of more help...I know that one reviewer USMC X brought up the same question and said that they should be at least Sergeants. That's about all I've got.**\*\***

**\*\*Also,** in regards to your second review, and the ship...it is similar to a slingshot, but there would be some recoil. The analogy given to me was to look at two magnets with repulsive forces on both ends. The AoR works in a similar fashion, but with a great deal greater mass. That all being said, the ship would still rock somewhat. And regarding the magnetic fields...if the field ever gets strong enough to affect the ship, the round should have already fired.**\*\***

**\*\*That's** about all I can tell you. The theory is solid. Obviously, we can't build one and test it (though I'd love to). But, I think that about covers it. Thanks for reviewing, and you should know: I take no offense. People who think about it and pose questions...I like, lol. So thank you!**\*\***

**\*\*Eternity of Night:** Thanks for all your reviews! Although, a couple of those...kind of out there...specifically 34. But thank you, and I hope you like what's coming!**\*\***

**\*\*1 way ticket:** Hey you! Figured you'd like that at least a little. Sorry that Jason and Landon were out...I decided to have them out having fun, as would be typical, lol. Thanks for reading and reviewing. See you soon, cutie. :)**\*\***

**\*\*Bubbles:** Slacker!!! lol. JK. Can't believe we finally got you reading this, hahaha. Still, glad you're enjoying it. I hope you like it as much when you get further along, and it actually starts getting better, lol. Thanks for reviewing for me!**\*\***

**\*\*The Great Valley Guardian:** Hey! I agree: ONI is the devil, lol. As for what happens to them...the end (of the book) is near. And you're about to see the result of my consideration of a "new member." Thanks for your compliments and review, and I hope you enjoy what's on the way!**\*\***

**\*\*NOW,** the next chapter!**\*\***

**\*\*\*\***



\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 51:<strong>

â€" \*\*The Final Struggle â€" \*\*

\*\*1300 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\*

\*\*Birmingham Military Base - Outside Spartan Barracks\*\*

Samuel sat in silence on the bed in his room with two giant weights on either side of him. It had been five days since Rex Sauter had come to the Birmingham Military Base and, for lack of a better word, abducted both him and Victoria. They'd driven to another nearby base, then flown to an ONI Operations Building in southern Florida.

From there, Victoria was immediately taken in for testing and Samuel was left alone in a waiting-room.

\_I should have never left,\_ the giant Spartan thought, staring at the two small devices sitting next to his MJOLNIR armor at one corner of the room. He'd been asked while at the ONI complex if he would like to test out some new technology that had been reverse-engineered from Forerunner Sentinel Beams. After seeing the weapons for himself, Samuel agreed.

He was disappointed. Even though no one on Zulu Company had ever seen one of the actual weapons except for on video, he knew that the no-doubt costly inventions by ONI were a very, very small step. The small lasers mounted externally to the underside of a Spartan's forearm and mimicked their Forerunner counterparts.

It sounded great, in theory. The problem was that, like the Sentinel Beams that the Master Chief and others had discovered, the weapons ran on a battery that, when drained, made the weapon next-to-useless. ONI's version could have an internal battery replaced, but it was costly, time-consuming, and ultimately useless.

But, for some reason, Samuel had still opted to take a pair home with him, in case a need for extra weaponry ever did occur. He wasn't sure why the spooks had given him the option, but he still took it.

The super-soldier sighed loudly, lifting the weights and calmly waiting for the call that he knew was never going to come. At the beginning of the third day that he was at the ONI Operations Building, Victoria had come up to him and informed him that she would be staying for as long as a couple of weeks.

Samuel immediately knew that something was wrong. The female Spartan would never, ever elect to stay with the spooks from ONI by her own accord, and certainly not alone, for that length of time. But she insisted. She swore that this was her own choice, and that they had proven that they could help her and improve her combat-abilities.

And then, they sent Samuel home.

He clenched his fists hard enough that they threatened to bleed, as they'd done many times before. Victoria had promised him to call within a couple of days. It had already been more than forty-eight

hours, and no such call had come. She was one of his team, his responsibility. And now, she could be suffering in some laboratory, and no one would be the wiser.

"Please," the giant Spartan said, looking up, "let her come home." All Samuel could think about was the rest of the team, and what was threatening to happen if she didn't return soon. Magnus had promised to find her himself. Blaine swore that neither he, nor any other Spartan, would be used for ONI's testing purposes ever again. And Zekeâ€|

Samuel didn't even want to think about the warpath that the smaller Spartan would go on.

He stood up and walked over to the door. Upon opening it, he heard sound coming from the end of the hall.

\_"Prison gates won't open up for me. On these hands and knees I'm crawlin'â€|all I reachâ€|for youâ€|"\_

It was that music again, one of two-dozen songs that would come blaring from Zeke's room at any hour of the day or night.

He was training again.

Samuel left the room and walked down the hall to the doorway to the smaller Spartan's room. As usual, his door was shut and locked.

\_"Well I'm terrified of these four walls...these iron bars can't hold my soul and all I need..."\_

"Hey, Zeke!" he shouted, knocking loudly. "Open up!"

The music was shut off and the door unlatched and the genetically-engineered Spartan was standing on the other side, tank-top and gym-shorts, with one of the heavy, fake swords in his hand.

"What?" he asked bitterly.

"Just seeing what you were up to," Samuel said. "Still at it, I see?" he motioned to the sword.

"Yeah," he answered. "Last-minute training has to be done. I'm leaving tonight."

Samuel stepped forward in time to stop the door from slamming shut. "What did you say?" he asked.

"I'm leaving." Zeke answered harshly. "Don't act like you don't know. I told you before you ever left for ONI's little base."

Samuel shook his head. "But Victoria elected to stay!"

"It's been five days, Samuel!" Zeke growled, putting the sword down on a dresser in the corner. "I'm not waiting any longer!"

"But this isn't the right move," Sam answered carefully, "it was her choice. They didn't just hold her hostage!" He lied. Samuel knew

better, but continued anyway. "She wouldn't want you to do this!"

"I don't give a damn what she wants!" he snapped. "I've got hunting to do. And if those ONI-bastards thought that those miserable Covies were on the warpath, they're in for a big surprise."

Samuel stood directly in the doorway. "Give it a little longer." He said as the smaller Spartan worked to find a way around him. "She said we'd hear back from her in a few days."

Zeke wasn't convinced. "Move, Sam." He said. When the giant Spartan didn't flinch, he added, "please."

"Forty-eight hours," Samuel said, conceding, but still standing firmly in front of the door. "Give it two more days. If we don't hear from her by then, I'll unlock the door to the Armory myself."

"Twenty-four," Zeke countered, grabbing the laptop from his desk, "one more day. This time tomorrow, I'll be picking pieces of ONI spooks from beneath my boots."

"This isn't a democracy." Sam said sternly.

"You're right," Zeke agreed, "it's not. But as long as we're off-duty, I don't have to take orders from anyone."

Samuel sighed, realizing that the situation was hopeless. As long as the Spartans were off-duty, there wasn't much to be done. "Fine," he said, stepping into the room. "In the meantime, go relax, alright? Stop trying to kill yourself." He motioned to the weights, swords, and guns scattered around the other Spartan's home.

Ezekiel scoffed, and left the room, slamming the door shut as he left.

Sam shook his head. "This is getting out of control." He turned and exited as well, and was walking by his room when he heard something.

It was a cell phone, and it was ringing.

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel walked out into the grass, re-setting the automatic turret that he and Blaine had taken from the Armory when Zulu Company had first arrived on the base. It was compatible with standard machine-gun rounds, HEAT Rockets, typical surface-to-air missiles, and a couple of other, less-typical munitions.<p>

"Demon," he said, putting the laptop down in the grass. "You got a wireless link yet?"

A second later, "yes," the AI said. "I'm all set."

"Great." Zeke answered. "I'll be right back."

With that, he left the grass and went back to his room, praying that Samuel had left. Luckily, the giant Spartan was long-gone. Ezekiel donned his MJOLNIR armor, turned the shielding on and disabled the

offensive-mounts. Without Demon, using the magnetic fields and plasma-generators could proveâ€|hazardous.

He walked back outside and stood in the grass about thirty-yards from the stationary gun.

"What's loaded?" He asked, establishing a wireless link with his laptop.

"HEAT Rockets," Demon answered. "We've got seven of them ready to go."

"Alright," Zeke said. "On my mark," he paused, taking a deep breath, bracing himself. "Fire!"

The first rocket erupted from the gun, flying directly toward the Spartan. Zeke took another breath, set his left boot behind him in the ground and braced himself, turning his chest directly forward.

The HEAT Rocket hit him square in the chest and detonated, blasting him clean off his feet and onto his back as his shield-alarm blared. His vision blurred for a second, but returned quickly.

"Not bad," he growled, breathing hard as he stood up. His shields started to return. "Again!"

The turret fired again, and the second rocket seemed to cover the distance in much less time. Ezekiel barely had time to brace himself as it exploded against his chest and he fell backwards again.

"How you holding up?" the AI's voice echoed in his head as he worked to stay conscious. That blaring alarm was really giving him a headache. When his breathing finally slowed, he worked to stand on shaky legs.

He was going to have to get used to the shock and pain associated with war if he was going to effectively wage anything with the spooks at ONI.

"Again!" he shouted, and the turret fired.

He watched as the projectile came barreling toward him, bracing himself on the same left foot. It got closer and closer, and he could almost feel the impact-

"What do you think you're doing?"

Samuel's voice caused the black-armored soldier to turn, and the rocket connected with the side of his breastplate. He felt himself be lifted off the ground and rolled in midair, landing hard on his back, facing the sky with his breath knocked so far out of him it was unreal.

"Ohâ€|" he moaned, "damn it allâ€|"

"This is you not trying to kill yourself?" Samuel shouted, walking up to him. Zeke could see on his face that he was furious. "Did you not hear a word I said?" The giant Spartan put his hands on his head like he was going crazy. "Are you out of your mind? Your shields aren't

even approved to take rockets in combat, much less for fun!"

"Would you stop yelling?" Zeke asked as the alarm on his suit continued to give him a blaring headache.

"Get up." Samuel said, suddenly deadly serious.

"I amâ€|" Ezekiel scowled, working to stand.

"Now," Sam added, and he stood the rest of the way up. He could feel his legs as they threatened to buckle beneath him.

"There." Zeke growled. "Happy?"

Samuel just looked at him. "I just got a call from an ONI officer stationed near HIGHCOM." He said. "The Corporal is on his way here. Apparently, we have new orders."

"What?" the black-armored soldier snapped. "That's impossible. That means--"

"A few things," Sam finished. "First of all, it means that things are officially back to normal, and now I can pull rank and order you not to do stupid things like shoot rockets at yourself in your free-time. Also, it means that you're not taking your vacation just yet."

Zeke took a step back. "Samuel," he growled, "we discussed this."

"The situation's changed." Samuel answered sternly. "Go get cleaned upâ€|now."

Ezekiel knew immediately that the leading Spartan had made his decision and â€" like it or not â€" he was once again bound by it. Grinding his teeth, he walked toward the barracks.

\* \* \*

><p>Landon wasn't sure what to feel as he stood in the grass with the rest of Zulu Company, waiting on the Corporal to arrive. Samuel had informed them all that they had new orders, but that had been all. So when the first of three military-issue Warthogs pulled into the base, it was expected that there would be questions.<p>

But none were asked.

Everyone knew the drill: this was a new day and the time for off-duty screwing off had passed. Samuel had made sure that each and every one of them was well-aware of it.

"Sir!" each of the seven soldiers shouted as the Corporal stepped out of the front 'Hog. Landon could see five individuals in the other two Warthogs, but they were in casual dress, and looked to be only slightly younger than Zulu Company.

"Good to see you," Charles said as he walked up, waving his hand for them to let their salutes down.

"And you," Stephanie said, then added, "sir."

The Corporal nodded with a smile, but it quickly disappeared from his face to be replaced by a grim, stern expression. "I have bad news," he said. After a deep breath, he continued, "according to recent news, the Flood have arrived."

It took Landon several seconds to grasp the meaning of the statement. The intergalactic parasite that had doomed the Forerunners ages beforeâ€¦|

It was on Earth.

"Sir," Samuel said, "we were told the Flood were eradicated by the Master Chief on the Ark."

"So was I." Charles said. "We were wrong." He paused. "You remember that Assault Carrier that you all boarded and fought on back in February?"

"Yes sir," Blaine said. "The Elites repaired it after the war ended."

"They tried to." He said. "But it turns out that things weren't as simple as we thought." After a second, the Corporal explained. "The Elites originally had only the shield-generator to repair, in case they ran across hostile Jiralhanae forces on their way home. They started repairs on March 2nd. Eight days later, we were informed that they had found several key weapon-systems and control-panels completely obliterated. They believed at the time that perhaps a few of the Brutes had escaped detection and proceeded to try and hinder their progress."

"But it wasn't the Brutes," Landon said, realizing.

"That's right." Charles said. "Less than forty-eight hours after we received word from them, the communications between us were terminated. It was only when we were about to send up a reconnaissance vessel this morning that we got word from what we believe to be the last surviving Elite on the spaceship."

"The last one?" Jason asked, skeptical. "There were over a hundred of them when we were there. What kind of force could eliminate them all, and without ever alerting us?"

The Corporal shook his head, his eyes downcast. "I don't think you know the Flood, Jason." He said sadly. "They're not like the Covenant. For one thing, if they've got a central, controlling force â€" which we believe that they do at this point â€" they're infinitely more clever than the Brutes could ever dream of being."

"My God," Stephanie whispered.

"But," he continued, "that being said, we also found out where the missing dropships you reported during your stay on the Assault Carrier went to. Yesterday, we had three separate attacks on small towns and cities in Europe, moving toward France."

"France?" Zeke asked, dumbfounded. "What the Hell for?"

"There is a major ONI facility in Paris." Charles said. "It has

dozens of the highest-ranking operatives and countless, crucial computer files. We've been trying to order evacuation, but ONI wants the building protected until they can evacuate everyone and get all of their files removed. They want to keep the Flood from getting into their databases or the minds of anyone in that vicinity."

"They're insane." Magnus said scornfully.

"You've got my vote," Charles agreed. "But they've convinced HIGHCOM to give the order to protect the immediate area around the facility." He paused. "I'm sorry to be the one to give you this order, but I have to: I need part of your team to work the ground and protect the facility."

"Why just part of the team?" Stephanie asked.

"Because the other half of you has an even harder mission," Charles said. "You see, when we got word from the Sangheili on the Assault Carrier, he said that he's barricaded himself in the Control Room, and that the Flood have made repeated attempts from inside the system to do a Slipspace jump right into Earth's atmosphere. Because he's got the manual overrides, he's been able to constantly counter them at every turn."

"Alright," Zeke growled, "I'll be the bad guy and ask. Why don't we just blow the whole damned ship straight to Hell, Sangheili or no Sangheili?"

"Love to," the Corporal said. "But we can't. When the war ended, first priority was given to rebuilding the people's morale and fixing the damaged towns and cities."

"So that means that our spaceships are still shot to Hell."

He nodded. "That's right. Even the Atonement is next to useless right now. The Ares still works, but the MAC Gun on it isn't even strong enough to break the Assault Carrier's shields, much less destroy it flat-out."

"Damn it." Blaine said.

"Yeah," Charles said. "The one thing the Elites successfully fixed was the shield-system. We believe they were about to take off when the Flood attacked."

"Alright," Samuel said. "Give us the orders. The seven of us will be ready to go ASAP."

"Seven?" the Corporal asked, puzzled. "Where is Victoria? You mean she's not going to be back in time to go?"

"Where did you think she was, sir?" Landon asked.

"I thought perhaps she just took off for a vacation, as you and Jason have done once or twice." He paused. "Where is she?"

"ONI has her." Magnus said bitterly.

The Corporal took a step back. "Since when?" he asked. "And why wasn't I informed?"

"We weren't given much of a choice, sir." Samuel said. "They left us with the option to hand her over or be branded as criminals."

The Corporal shook his head, muttering something under his breath. "I'll get her back to you for the mission." He said. "You have my word."

Magnus didn't hesitate. "Thank you, sir."

"Forget about it." Charles said with a wave of his hand. "Now, I want to introduce you to the soldiers that are going to be helping you for this particular mission."

"Excuse me?" Zeke spoke up. "Helping us?"

The Corporal turned and motioned for the people in the two remaining Warthogs to come forward. In silence, five soldiers, made up of two males and three females, with one particularly tall girl in the center of the group, exited the vehicles and walked up beside him, forming a straight line and staring into the eyes of Zulu Company.

"Zulu Company," Charles said, "meet Nova Company."

\* \* \*

><p>"Nova Company is part of a parallel program to the one that you participated in," Corporal Charles explained. "A lot of the exact same procedures were shared between programs, but these guys were stationed in the Inner Colonies until the Second Battle of Earth, when they were sent here."<p>

Suddenly one of the girls in the line spoke up. "Long time, no see, Magnus." She gave a wide smile.

"You too, Jade," the giant Spartan answered.

"Wait," Stephanie said, interrupting. "You've met?"

"Magnus was sent on several missions during his time with ONI," the Corporal said. "Some of these were done on his own, but others were with Nova Company."

"Alright," Samuel said. "I suppose intros are in order."

"You guys do that," Charles said. "I'll be back in a bit. I've got to go talk to the head of the base."

"Yes sir."

With that, he walked to the nearest 'Hog, hopped in, and left.

Seconds later, the guy on the far right side of the line stepped forward. He was about Blaine's size, but slightly shorter, with short, brown hair. "\*\*\*Spartan 041\*\*," he said, "Nathan Taylor. I handle tech and vehicles for Nova." He motioned to the guy next to him, who was roughly the same size, but with dark blue eyes and a similar hairstyle. "This is--"



"Daniel Fuhrer," the soldier said, a smug grin covering his face. "\*\*\*Spartan 028\*\*", if that matters to anyone here. I do the sniping, and some close-quarters combat."

\_Figures,\_ Jason thought.

"I'm Jade." The girl who had spoken to Magnus stepped forward. "Jade Cross, \*\*Spartan 047\*\*. I'm CQB."

\_Another close-quarters combatant,\_ Jason thought. \_Wow.\_

The girl in the center stepped forward and Jason could see that she stood almost as tall as Samuel. "This is Angela Browning," she said, motioning to the other girl that hadn't been introduced. She'd been completely silent. "She's got a thing for CQB too, like the whole team, but she's best in demolition."

"\*\*Spartan 043\*\*," she said, "pleasure."

"And I'm Alexandra," the tallest one said. "I'm \*\*Spartan 030\*\*," Alexandra Riley. I'm head of Nova Company."

Sam was the first in the group to respond. "\*\*\*Spartan 025\*\*," he said, "Samuel King. This is Blaine," he motioned to the shorter soldier beside him.

"Blaine Everson," he said bitterly. "I handled pretty much whatever the Brutes were dumb enough to send my way; \*\*Spartan 011\*\*." He finished as abruptly as he had started.

Jason stepped forward before the awkward silence could last. "\*\*\*Spartan 001\*\*," he said, "Jason Zant. Vehicles, some demo, and the occasional sniping job."

Landon followed, grinning from ear to ear. "I'm Landon Brooks, \*\*Spartan 003\*\*. Jason's a liar." He said with a smile. "I'm the driver on this team."

"Stephanie Jones is our other explosives user and does the occasional bit of CQB." Samuel said, introducing the female Spartan when she didn't step forward.

"\*\*Spartan 002\*\*," she said with a small smile.

"And you all know Magnus," Samuel said, at which point Magnus nodded, smiling to the group. "Ezekiel-"

"Has better things to do than to be wasting time here," the smaller Spartan finished. "For the record, what I do is none of your concern. Just stay out of my way."

"Zeke-" Stephanie started, but was cut off.

"You got a problem?" The soldier that had introduced himself as 'Daniel' asked, taking a hostile step forward.

"Ease back," Zeke warned coldly, "before we come up a soldier short."

"Zeke!"

"Daniel!"

Then, two voices in almost unison: "Enough!"

Jason looked at Samuel, then at the girl, Alexandra, then back at Samuel.

"Wow," the giant Spartan said, looking at her. "I guess there's one on every team."

"It'd be boring without Daniel." She answered, giving the smaller Spartan a quick glare. "Still, he can be a trial sometimes. You'll have to excuse him."

Jason shook his head. \_What is it with Sniper Rifles attracting the arrogant bastards?\_ He thought.

\* \* \*

><p>Two hours later, the twelve Spartans were sitting in the mess hall, waiting patiently for the Corporal to return from the main building with information from the Office of Naval Intelligence. Samuel had a sneaking suspicion that his work would yield no results, but he did appreciate the Corporal's attempts to get Victoria back.<p>

"So," Jade started, "I heard that you guys took on the entire Assault Carrier, with the Prophet onboard, and a new Covenant creature called a "Stalker" that we've never even seen before." She paused, taking a deep breath. "Is that true?"

"Damn right it is." Blaine said, holding the huge Gravity Hammer on his shoulder. "We had some help from the Sangheili but the basic premise is right."

"I got to pilot a Longsword!" Landon spoke up randomly, looking around the room, excited.

"Really?" this time it was Nathan Taylor from Nova that looked over, intrigued. "What's it like?"

"It's awesome!"

"And if he ever does it again," Stephanie said, "Sam's gonna rip his head off." She laughed loudly, triggering a chorus of mocking snickers from the group.

"It was worth it." Landon said.

Just then, the door to the mess hall opened.

"Spartans!" the Corporal shouted. Instantly, all of them were standing and at a crisp salute. "At ease," he added.

"Sir," Samuel said. He was almost nervous to ask. "What did they say?"

"I've got good news and bad news." He answered. "The good news is

that Victoria will be joining you on this mission. The bad news is that you must prepare to leave immediately. The Flood are converging on the areas surrounding Paris, and the Assault Carrier is slowly moving toward Earth's atmosphere. We tried to get a ship from the surrounding colonies, but no luck so far. Our resources are spent, and all of our heavy military power that's left is in the Outer Colonies."

"How are we splitting?" Samuel asked.

"That's up to you, Sam." Charles said. "I trust your judgment. I just ask that you take at least one member of Nova with you into space. The rest can stay here with whoever you appoint."

"Yes sir."

Samuel turned to the group.

"One more time," Stephanie said with a fond smile. "What're teams?"

"Yeah, Goliath," Zeke said, "let's get to it. We're not getting any younger."

"Amen to that!" Landon shouted. "Let's start this shit up!"

Blaine gave his usual "I'm-bad-and-I-know-it" grin. "Let the ass-kicking commence." He said.

Samuel smiled. That was his team. He turned to Magnus, who nodded, acknowledging that he was ready to take orders. Jason did the same.

"Alright!" he shouted. "Teams are: Jason, Landon, Stephanie on the ground, along with all of Nova except for Nathan."

"Wait!" Jason said. "Samuel, that's not fair! It's infinitely more dangerous in space. What about us?"

He shook his head. "There will be vehicles on the ground. I have no doubt that the Flood will need to be held at bay, and that turrets and the big guns are all we're going to be able to use. I need the two of you for that."

"What about me?" Stephanie asked. "I should be on the ship. I'm cybernetic. I can't be infected."

"I know." Samuel said. "But I want you here."

"But why-"

"Because of what drives you," Sam answered. "Each of us has something that drives us to go on. Yours is the protection of those around you. I saw it in L.A. and I saw it a dozen times before then. I need you in that city, where you can protect the innocents around you."

"I'd rather be protecting you guys." She said pitifully, as a last-ditch effort to get him to change his mind. Samuel knew better.

"Just take care of yourself, okay? Keep Landon and Jason on-task."

She nodded.

Samuel took a breath and turned around. "Zeke, Blaine, Magnus: you're with me. Nathan, you're with us as well."

"Got it," Blaine said. The others were silent.

Samuel suddenly got to the front of the group, so that everyone was staring right at him. "That's it everyone. You have your jobs." He paused. "Listen to me: this is it! The whole world's on the table!" His hands clenched at his sides. "No mistakes!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

Satisfied, he turned to the Corporal. "We can have our armor and be ready within the hour." He said.

Corporal Charles nodded, smiling proudly at what Samuel could only assume was the notion that these were his Spartans. "Go get 'em, Spartans." He said.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Well, that's all folks. First of all: I'll be doing more to introduce Nova. More details, more traits, etc. They will NOT have major roles anytime soon. They'll play supporting roles without POV's so as not to take "airtime" from my Spartans, lol. But, I needed more hands on this one, since I'm splitting them up. Hope you all enjoyed it, and I would love for you to tell me what you think of them. Thanks very much in advance!<strong>

\*\*Talk to you all soon.\*\*

## 53. Chapter 52: Arrival

\*\*Author's Notes: Alright! Next chapter! Sorry it took so long...I had it almost ready, but the end of the semester has arrived, and I've got more projects and papers to do than I can count (yeah, I thought I had a lot during midterms...and I was WRONG). Still, I got this one finished, and I really hope to have a pair out to add to it soon. Sorry, and please let me know if I have any readers left! lol. But, FIRST:\*\*

\*\*\_WARNING\_ I have bad news. This was supposed to be posted with the last chapter, but I failed to remember. My favorite author, Michael Crichton, passed away a few weeks ago, on November 4th, 2008. This is my small tribute to a great author, and to the greatest book of all-time (my oh-so-humble opinion): Jurassic Park. He had some other excellent works, and will be missed greatly. If you agree with this tribute...feel free to say so. If you do not...you should probably leave that fact to be noted at a later time, as I'm still quite upset and emotionally unstable. /\_WARNING\_\*\*

\*\*This one...also short. Seems to be a trend for this segment. But that's okay, 'cause I get them out faster. And they're still 4000 words or so. I'm cutting them off for content, I assure you, and no

other reason. Now, for this one...I do a little bit more with Nova. Nothing major. It's gonna take time, and I want kind of a gradual integration. That being said, I'm skipping straight to reviews, so that I can get to the chapter!\*\*

**\*\*REVIEWS:\*\***

**\*\*Samson00:** Hola! I agree entirely...it has come quite a ways. They went from a bunch of puzzled kids to the next movie I wanna see! Grrrrrr. lol. This segment is gonna be awesome though! I can't wait to actually get it done...if college ever gives me a break.\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey! Yeah...things are heating up once again, finally. I've got this segment planned out though, so no worries. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Glad you like the introduction of Nova. And I promise you two things: Yes, they will have similar traits and (maybe) similar augments (haven't entirely decided yet), but NO, they will not "just be clones" of Zulu. I have characters I like. I don't need more of the exact same. lol. Thanks for the review, and I hope you like what's on the way!\*\*

**\*\*WolfyWolf:** Hey! I'm happy that everyone has taken such a liking to Nova and the new personalities that I'm (slowly) introducing. I'm deciding the details on their augments still, but I'll seriously take your idea into consideration. ;) Thanks for the compliments and your review, and I look forward to your input on this next one!\*\*

**\*\*i-kill-jackals:** Why thank you! And thanks for reviewing as well!\*\*

**\*\*Bashbro:** lol, thanks very much. I'm hoping this only gets better...\*\*

**\*\*Mhop12:** Sorry...they're gonna be kind of short occasionally, especially since I'm splitting the team and I'll try to do them in pairs after this one. But, still, things should work out for the best, I think. Also...sorry to hear about your X-Box...hope it's working by now. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*Eternity of Night:** lol...Flood ftw huh? I guess we'll just have to see. Thanks!\*\*

**\*\*Redflame101:** Yep, lol, a few new ones. And no, as of right now...there are no plans for them to ever personally meet the Master Chief. Sorry...again, my reason is a simple one: I don't think I could accurately do his personality, and I'd rather not stain a very well-crafted character. Thanks for your review though!\*\*

**\*\*If I was the Master Chief:** lol, sorry...guess I should have specified: they're from a different program, so the numbers are different. Also, that particular number would be N043, for Nova Company, so it is different. Thanks though!\*\*

**\*\*Woodzyl4:** Glad you like Nova too. Everyone seems to have taken to them well (which I'm very happy about). And as for Vic...well, it's coming up. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*vernox:** lol, yeah...Zeke and Daniel would have mild issues if paired. Not to mention, I tossed around having Blaine on the ground, wreaking havoc, but my space plot is especially specific, and I need exactly who I have. Trust me...it'll be good. That I promise you. Thank you, as always!\*\*

**\*\*JadeJin-Obil:** lol, in regards to the website and the changes...heck if I know. Also, on the Elites: it is neither the Arbiter or Rtas, because they're both major plot characters that have very defined personalities (like the Master Chief), and I don't want to risk messing them up. In this story, every other Sangheili craft besides this one Assault Carrier have returned home, as they did at the end of Halo 3. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** No kidding! lol. I can barely keep 7 or 8 of them running good airtime. I'd never make it with over a dozen. But, like I said, I needed a few extra hands (and guns!) on this one, so I decided to pull them in a little earlier than I had originally anticipated. Thanks for reviewing, and I hope you like what's coming!\*\*

**\*\*superultramario:** I have plans for a couple (but not all) of the deleted species. I won't reveal which ones quite yet, but you'll see in the future, I promise. Also, the Sentinels...if I use them, it'll be a while. I have no really good place to put them right now, as they're Forerunner defense mechanisms, and I have no plans to put Zulu on a Halo or Installation anytime in the immediate future. Thanks for your input though!\*\*

**\*\*armoured-blade:** lol, sorry I couldn't stick the two together. Another time, perhaps? (Hint.) As for what drives the Spartans...I'd like to think a few are kind of like Steph's, in that they're fairly obvious. But the rest of them...I plan to really reveal somewhat in this segment, though their individual drives will be absolutely vital in the sequel. And yes, I'm doing split POVs for this segment after this chapter. I'll try to get chapters up in pairs, one on the ground, and one in space (although, there might be one or two more in space...if so, I'll let everyone know). And yeah, Zeke's stuck for now. Samuel put his (gigantic) foot down, and all else is second to that. But don't worry: there will be plenty of fighting for everyone. As for your question on the parallel programs...lol, you know my standard response. ;) \*\*

**\*\*Samus 117:** lol, some new Spartans, but I wouldn't say "two Zekes" by any means. Daniel's similar, both in traits and in the sniping potential, but everyone will see some major differences before this is all said and done. I promise you that. Also, as for how long Nova is hanging around: they'll be around 'til the end of this book. After that, I tell you this: you'll see them again, but in time. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*hellhound cerberus:** A lot of your questions I can't answer just yet (sorry...plot elements, lol, and I'm an evil, secretive writer...). Also, Zeke and Daniel will be in the same group eventually, but not in this book. For now, neither leader could stand double the attitude in a single mission. hehe. Thanks for your compliment, and enjoy!\*\*

**\*\*Lecter42:** Hey, sorry you didn't like the idea of a new character or

set of them, lol, but as you said...review came in after the next one was already up. haha. Still, they will be in the background, as you said, until the sequel, so I'm hoping I make it work alright. Thanks for the compliments on the "emotional" chapter...it's really not my strongsuit, lol. Also, about Samuel not mentioning which team Vic is on...well, that was on purpose. Not really foreshadowing, but I wanted to let people wonder a little. Thanks for the compliments and your reviews, and I hope you like what's coming up!\*\*

\*\*the-super-saiyan-jedi-again: Hey! Thanks! It's always great to have new readers (and of course I love getting new reviewers, lol). And yep, Vic's return will be addressed in this chapter. Also...when can you expect a new chapter? Well...this one, right now, lol. And the next one...I'm really hoping soon. But, I'm reluctant to make promises anymore. College is killing me.\*\*

\*\*Thanks all, and sorry again for the delay! Enjoy, and please review!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 52:<strong>

â€" \*\*Arrival â€" \*\*

\*\*1700 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\*

\*\*Birmingham Military Base - Birmingham Armory\*\*

Blaine stood with a stone-cold expression as the Spartans filed into the Armory, looking for their chosen weapons. They all knew that enemies were going to be a little more numerous than ever before, so arms with large magazine-capacities were the mainstream choices.

As they all spread out over the room, Blaine immediately moved toward the back, grabbing a fully-charged Gravity Hammer from a rack on the far wall. He attached it magnetically to his back, and moved on.

"You're still gonna use that thing?" Stephanie asked from behind him. He turned to see her putting a pair of Brute Maulers on her thighs.

"Never leave home without it," he answered plainly, "especially not this time." He reached into a crate and grabbed as many grenades as his armor would hold.

As soon as he was stocked, Blaine moved to the other side of the room, with the more traditional heavy weapons, and grabbed a Rocket Launcher from a cabinet. He got as much ammunition as he could hold, and moved to go find a couple of light weapons.

When he got to the stands full of M6G Pistols, Assault Rifles, SMG's, Plasma Rifles, and other various weapons, Ezekiel was already there, loading a pair of Pistols.

"You, wielding a light weapon?" he said. "I don't see it."

Blaine shrugged inside his armor. "We need as much ammo as we can

carry. What better way than to have more guns?" He reached over and took a Brute Mauler from one stand.

Ezekiel scoffed, putting the two Pistols on his thighs. "Simple," he said, "take more ammo." He reached over and took half-a-dozen magazines for the Pistols, then magnetically attached them to various points on his armor.

"Where's your sword gonna go?" Blaine asked, detached. Zeke twisted sideways, and Blaine saw the hilt attached magnetically to the underside of his left arm, just below the elbow. "Ah," he said, "I see."

He looked around to see what the others were taking with them. Samuel, of course, already had what he wanted and was standing in the doorway to the Armory, waiting for Zulu Company to file out and meet Nova, who had already gotten their weapons. Sam had a pair of Shotguns strapped to the tree-trunks he called his legs, a Battle Rifle on his back, and a Spartan Laser right beside it. He had two devices on his lower forearms that Blaine had come to recognize as the prototype Sentinel Beams from ONI. And, in his hands, was the standard-issue Assault Rifle.

Blaine glanced to the other side of the room. Magnus had a Shotgun and a Battle Rifle on his thighs, and what looked like a Heavy Machine Gun on his back. No other Spartans except him and Samuel could probably attach something so large effectively, but Magnus made it look easy. Between that, the guns on his legs and what was in his arms he was probably holding enough ammunition and Fuel Rods to wage a small war.

Landon had a Shotgun, an M6G, and a Rocket Launcher. Jason had favored a Covenant Carbine, Brute Shot, and a Mauler.

Stephanie had what Blaine had expected: two Maulers on her legs, a Fuel Rod Cannon on her back, and an Assault Rifle in her hands. She wouldn't need much else.

"Ready to go?" Samuel's voice echoed in their heads. Each of the Spartans nodded, walking toward the door. Before he followed suit, Blaine reached over and grabbed a Flare from the equipment crate.

\_Here we go,\_ he thought.

\* \* \*

><p>Stephanie sat in silence in the back of one Troop-Transport Warthog as a trio of them headed south, to a nearby ONI complex. There, she and the other six Spartans that were staying on the ground were to board a Pelican and go straight to France.<p>

Jason was in the passenger seat in front of her. Landon was driving.

"So," the gold-armored Spartan said, "what do you guys think of Nova Company?" He paused. "Personally, I just wonder why we haven't heard about them sooner."

"I like that girl, Jade." Landon said. Stephanie rolled her eyes.



"She can talk and talk and talk. Did you hear her in the mess hall? A real chatterbox."

"Much like someone we know," Stephanie interjected. "I just want to know what they're about. I mean, did they go through the same augmentations we did? Similar ones? I mean, they could all be Magnus-style, for all we know."

"I doubt it." Jason said. "That's some expensive shit, to outfit him like that. And besides, only someone who had the growth hormones used on them would be big enough to put cannons directly into their arms like that. So that one girl—oh, shit, what's her name?"

"Alexandra," Landon said.

"You just know all the girls' names, don't you?" Stephanie said.

"Damn right," he laughed.

"Anyway," Jason continued, "she'd be the only one who could potentially hold something like that, and from what I could tell, she's not a biomech like we are."

Landon swerved hard to make a left turn that he nearly missed, and Stephanie nearly fell into the bars that made up the cage around her.

"Hey!" she shouted. "Where did you learn to drive, the racetrack?"

"Who says I learned?" he shouted, swerving hard to the right.

"Just close your eyes!" Jason shouted to Stephanie. "We're almost to the base, so this should all be over soon!"

"Oh," she said, putting her head down as Landon swerved again, "that's what I'm afraid of."

"There it is!" Landon shouted. "Land ho!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Why exactly are we taking a Phantom?" Zeke growled with obvious disdain, stepping into the alien craft after Magnus.<p>

"No choice," Samuel said. "The Elites left it here. The Ares is just outside Earth's atmosphere, and this is the fastest way to take us up to it."

"And remind me again, why do we have to hit the Ares?"

"We're meeting Victoria there."

"Oh," he said, taking a seat in one corner, "right."

"Remind me again," Blaine said, "why aren't we just bombing the ship? I mean, why aren't we just taking a bomb with us and blasting the whole damn thing?"

"Can't," Samuel answered, "We apparently don't have any of the Covenant's Antimatter bombs to use, and HIGHCOM doesn't want to risk a smaller explosive for fear that infected pieces of the ship might be caught in the atmosphere and either release Flood spores or worse - fall to the planet's surface."

"There's no damned way any rotting corpse is going to survive that kind of fall," Zeke growled. "Bunch of freakin' idiots."

"You're just bitter," Blaine said. "Don't worry though, we'll be meeting Victoria soon."

"Who is Victoria?" The member of Nova Company, Nathan, asked, sitting next to the white-armored Spartan. His armor was olive-green, much like the Master Chief's had been when he was last seen, but without the scars.

"She's one of our teammates." Magnus said. "Her armor is a lot like Zeke's, but she's a little more agile than he is." He added with a tinge of mockery.

"Bite me," the black-armored soldier snapped.

"And where is she?" Nathan continued as the door to the Phantom closed and the AI-controlled craft lifted from the ground.

"She was at ONI." Magnus answered, "but thankfully, not anymore."

The younger Spartan nodded. "They never bothered us very much," he said with an air of detachment. "Don't know whyâ€|"

Magnus shrugged. "Damned if I know," he said. "But they took a lot of pleasure in separating this team. Between my augmentations, their little "torture-games" to see if I could withstand the pains of war, the week-long missions with next to nothing in the way of weaponry or even foodâ€|" he paused, taking a deep breath. "I hate those bastards."

"Finally," Zeke said bitterly, "something we agree on."

"Let it go," Samuel said suddenly, looking at the smaller Spartan. "If, when all this is over, you still want to take your little vacation, you're more than welcome to. But, for now, focus on the Flood, alright?"

"Oh, trust me," Zeke growled. "I really don't give a damn what we're fighting. You put something in front me, I'll make sure it's dead when I leave." After a pause, he added, "for good."

"Fair enough," the brown-armored soldier said.

They sat in silence after that. Magnus could only wonder how Victoria would have changed in the week she'd spent with ONI. Granted, it wasn't a full weekâ€|but it hadn't taken them even that long to break him of a few things that they deemed were "unhealthy."

He scoffed. The only thing "unhealthy" that he'd done was to allow himself to be taken from Zulu Company in the first place.

"So," Nathan started, snapping Magnus from his thoughts. "How long is this trip supposed to take?"

"The Ares is just outside the atmosphere." Samuel said. "Should be about an hour."

Nathan nodded.

"Alright," Blaine said, "it doesn't really matter, but I am curious: what kind of augmentations are you and your team bringing to the battlefield?"

Nathan shrugged. "There are a few similar to your own, but also a couple that differ greatly."

"Excellent," Zeke answered sarcastically. "A wise-guy; say everything and nothing, all at the same time."

"Sorry," Nathan said. "Basically, a couple of us were given cybernetic implants--"

"Sounds familiar," Blaine said lowly.

"Alexandra got the growth hormones." He continued. "A few of us always thought it was because she showed the most leader-potential, and that augmentation had the greatest success rate."

"Trust me," Samuel said, "when they told you that it had the best rateâ€|it wasn't by very much. Magnus and I were the only two to survive ours."

Nathan nodded slowly. "I never really questioned it," he said. "The six of us that survivedâ€|we just counted our blessings and forgot about the procedures."

Magnus was puzzled. "You guys never mentioned a sixth member." He said. Nathan shook his head.

"It was our third mission," he said, "the last one before we came back for the Second Battle of Earth." A pause, and then, "none of us really like to talk about it."

Magnus sighed. He'd heard about Christopher's death at the hands of the Brutes and their sneak-attack on Zulu Company, but he'd never been able to truly relate to the others in that regard.

Now, however, with Victoria's life on the line at ONI, he worried that he would soon be able to.

\* \* \*

><p>At the same time, the ground-team was seated inside Tango 257, one of the newer, D77H-TCI Pelican dropships, and flying over the Atlantic Ocean toward Paris, France. Barely anyone had spoken since they arrived at the ONI complex.<p>

Some tension was still present between the two companies, and Landon had expected that. It wasn't the kind of tension that Zeke and Daniel had shown, however, but a kind more focused on the idea that both

teams were being forced to trust their lives to soldiers that they had never fought with before.

It was no different than when the Elites had first appeared on the scene. Neither side wanted to be the first to rely on the other.

Even the green-armored chatterbox, Jade, had been completely soundless.

But now, however, Landon was unable to bear that terrible silence any longer.

"What do you think their chances are?" he asked, focusing only on the fellow Zulu Company soldiers.

"I don't know." Jason admitted, knowing exactly what he was talking about.

"They'll be fine." Stephanie spoke up, but she sounded really shaken. It was uncharacteristic for the biomechanical Spartan. "I mean, look who it is. Blaine? Magnus? Samuel? Zeke?" she paused. "And Vic will be with them."

Landon looked down at the weapons on his armor, suddenly wishing more than anything that he could be with the rest of his team. "You're right." He said, all but forcing a smile onto his face. "And if I know Blaine and Magnus, all that will be left of the Flood when they're done will be a big crater, and a bad smell."

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel could feel the knot in his stomach as the Phantom docked inside the UNSC <em>Ares<em>. Assuming that they all survived this new threat, the next five minutes " spent inside the \_Ares\_ " would likely determine the rest of his life. If Victoria was alive, well, and had indeed made her own choice to stay at ONI"there was no reason for a war with the spooks. They would have kept to their word, for the most part.

But, if not"

He shook the thought out. There were more pressing things to focus on right now, like the Flood.

The Phantom slowed to a stop inside one of the docking bays, and Samuel led the way out as the door opened automatically. Ezekiel took a deep breath and stood up, following the rest of the group out.

"You gonna be okay for this?" Demon asked from somewhere within his head. Zeke scowled.

"You worry about you, and let me worry about me." He snapped.

"Fine," the AI said. "But remember: my life is tied to yours, so no stunts while I'm in here."

"First," Zeke said, "you're not living. You're an AI. Second: as long

as my life is at stake, I'll make all the decisions as to what counts as a stunt. And trust me, I value my own life, so you're in good company."

"That why you brought that gift Vic gave you last time we were on the Carrier?"

Ezekiel gritted his teeth. "I brought it to give it back." He said. "Now drop it."

The AI said nothing.

"Hey!" Samuel shouted, his voice shattering the black-armored soldier's conversational attitude. "Let's go." Zeke saw that the other Spartan was at the other side of the docking bay, with the others—and that he himself was still less than ten steps from the Phantom.

"Damn," he growled, walking to catch up with the others.

"You sure you're alright?" Blaine's voice was next.

"Fine," Zeke answered. "Why does everyone keep asking me that?"

The white-armored Spartan just shrugged.

Ezekiel was about to say something when a shape rounded the corner in the hallway ahead of them, and the entire group stopped.

She was clad in the same indigo-colored armor that she had departed in. An Energy Sword was strapped to her waist with an M6G Pistol on the other side. A Battle Rifle was attached to her back, and Deployable Cover equipment as well.

"Hey," she said, rather awkwardly.

"Victoria!" Magnus, as usual, was the first to respond. He walked right up to her and Zeke almost wanted to vomit when he thought that the giant Spartan was going to hug her. Thankfully, neither event took place.

"It's good to see you back safe," Blaine said, walking up to her behind Samuel, who was unusually quiet. "We were worried."

"I'm fine," she said, tilting her head slightly downward and still sounding slightly uncomfortable. But the voice was the same. It was Victoria, no doubt about it. "Really," she added, "no worries."

"Blaine's right." Sam said. "If you weren't okay, I'm afraid this whole team was on the edge of collapse." He glanced back in Ezekiel's direction.

The black-armored Spartan said nothing.

"Well," Samuel said, and Zeke knew that they were on a private channel.

He simply gave the other Spartan a look that, if translated, would basically mean "what?" Sam couldn't see it through his visor—but

somehow, he knew.

A second later, he added, "after the destruction you've threatened to bring down on the Office of Naval Intelligence, after training more than you slept for the last week, and most importantly: after making me want to kill youâ€|you've got nothing to say?"

"Can we just skip the idiotic sentiment?" He said defensively. "We have somewhere to be." With that, he turned and began to walk back to the Phantom.

"What the Hell was that?" Demon's voice echoed inside his head.

Ezekiel didn't answer. He honestly didn't know. After all the Hell that ONI had put the whole team through and all the training and torment he'd willingly subjected himself to, she was back. And she was fine. He should be thrilled.

And, for some inexplicable reason, he couldn't escape the feeling that something was terribly wrong. Something about the Flood and the power he'd only heard stories about inspired a feeling that he couldn't quite put his finger on. It created a black hole in the back of his consciousness that was eating away at his composure. What could possibly do that? Was it hatred? Curiosity?

Fear?

\* \* \*

><p>"ETA: five minutes, Spartans!" Tango 257's pilot shouted from the front of the craft. "You guys ready to go?"<p>

"Born ready!" Landon shouted back.

"Great," he said, "Because I sure as Hell wouldn't be goin' down there after what I heard about the Flood. You're some hard-ass individuals."

"Thank you, sir!" Jade shouted. She turned her head to face Nova's white and blue-armored leader, Alexandra. "Here we go!"

"Yeah," the other Spartan said. Then, she surprised everyone by turning her head to the three members of Zulu Company. "It really is an honor to get to work with you guys," she said. "I know that, if you're anything like us, you're having a hard time reconciling the fact that we're here instead of your teamâ€|" she paused, "but I can assure you, we've made our bones kicking the Covenant to the curb. And we've got your backs."

Jason let a ghost of a smile appear as the Pelican began to descend. "Thank you for that," he said. "But the fact is this: you're Spartans, just like us. As far as I'm concerned, we're as good as family."

"And no one here questions what you're capable of," Stephanie added. "Hell, knowing that our team had to be split, I can tell you: there's no other team on the planet we'd rather be paired with."

"Spartans!" the pilot shouted. "ETA: sixty seconds."

"Everybody ready?" Jason asked, checking the grenades in his Brute Shot and the ammunition in his Covenant Carbine.

"Damn right!" Daniel from Nova Company shouted, cocking the Sniper Rifle in his hands.

"Why the Hell did you even bring that?" Jade asked with a laugh. "You know that the Flood are virtually invulnerable to sniper-rounds."

"Don't start," Daniel warned half-heartedly. "These might be for you."

The female Spartan only shook her head.

\_Just like home,\_ Jason thought as the Pelican slowed its decent and the rear hatch opened to reveal the roof of a skyscraper. A dozen decorated officers were staring up at them, waving the Pelican down.

When it was only a couple of meters from the ground, the pilot gave a hand-signal to the Spartans and each one stood up and jumped casually onto the titanium roof.

The moment they were clear, Tango 257 lifted into the air and immediately soared in the direction from which they'd come.

"Welcome, Spartans," one of the officers stated as they gathered nearby. He was Caucasian and looked to be in his late fifties. He had a slight Irish accent. "I'm Major General O'Donnell."

"Sir!" in an instant, seven Spartans were at rigid attention. Another officer, this one much younger, stepped up beside him.

"At ease," O'Donnell said. "This here is Lieutenant Roberts, within the Office of Naval Intelligence. He'll have your updates regarding the Flood's progress within the city-boundaries. If you need anything, however, you're to report directly to me. Now, get your asses in gear! The Flood have already sent their first wave in our direction."

"Yes sir," Alexandra said, stepping forward. "Thank you, sir." She turned to face the Spartans. "This is it! I want everyone set up and ready to go in two minutes!"

\* \* \*

><p>"We're preparing to dock." Samuel said, watching the monitors that showed the view outside the Phantom as it approached one side of the Assault Carrier. "Breka," he said over the intercom, trying to get the Elite's attention within the ship.<p>

"Yes, Demon," the Sangheili answered. "Say the word, and the shields will fall."

Samuel waited a moment, trying to gauge the distance to the docking bay. "Eight seconds," he said, "then drop the shields."

"Of course."

He continued to watch the monitors as the AI inside the Phantom guided it toward the ship. Seconds later, the outline of the shield vanished as the dropship passed through and into the docking bay.

It hadn't even landed before the Flood in the ship's systems had restored the shield to full power.

Samuel took a deep breath as the Phantom finally touched down. The monitor showed nothing but almost pitch-dark space outside, with nothing but the smallest backup-lighting to give the area an eerie, purple glow.

"Open the door." He said, and the entrance to the Phantom slid open. "Zeke, Vic: you're first. Go."

The two Spartans immediately activated the cloaking technology on their MJOLNIR armor and disappeared from the Phantom. After an excruciatingly long seven seconds, two green lights flashed in the corner of the giant Spartan's HUD.

"Alright," he turned to the others. "Blaine first, then Nathan, then I'll go. Magnus, you're in the rear. Have the AI disable every vital system on the ship. Cripple it. Then remove the AI on your way out. The Flood do not get off this Carrier."

"Got it," Magnus answered.

Samuel watched as Blaine walked cautiously out, Gravity Hammer drawn. Nathan followed with a Shotgun in his hands. Sam was right behind him. He felt oddly responsible for this new soldier, as if he were his own.

"Area's clear, Sam." Zeke said. "Radar shows nothing."

"Doesn't mean shit," Blaine growled.

"I'm with him." Sam said. "Eyes up."

As he said it, Magnus emerged from the now-completely dark Phantom dropship. "It's toast," he said. "It won't run again unless I say so."

"Good," Samuel said.

"Got a contact," Blaine said calmly, "right on the edge of radar."

"I got it." Nathan said, putting the Shotgun on his back and pulling an Assault Rifle to bear. As he did it, Samuel saw a group of small, strange-looking creatures that appeared to waddle and jump toward them on plant-looking tentacles. They looked almost like small, creepy-looking balloons.

Before he could get a really good look at them, however, Nathan opened fire from the back of the group with the Assault Rifle. After only a handful of bullets, however, each and every one of the odd-looking creatures popped just like a balloon, leaving nothing but a hint of green gas in the air and stains on the ground.



"Nice job," Blaine said sarcastically. "You just took out a group of balloons." He clapped his hands mockingly.

"Hey," Nathan protested, "I don't take chances with-"

BANG!

Samuel put the Shotgun in front of him, right over Nathan's shoulder, and opened fire, all but obliterating the upper-half of the strange form that had come charging from behind him. The green-armored Spartan ducked low and shouted something foul, but then turned around and saw the creature lying on the ground behind him.

"Holy shit," he said. "Is that-"

"The remains of an Elite," Zeke muttered, looking down at the zombie-like creature that was basically in pieces above the waist.

Samuel shook his head, staring at this new enemy. It looked vaguely like a blue-armored Elite, but the body was mangled and torn. Horrid, rotting tentacles shot out from the shoulder where the left arm should have been.

"So, this is the Flood." Magnus said bitterly.

Samuel was about to respond, but stopped cold. He could see red images slowly creeping in from the edges of his radar. First only a couple, but soon, his HUD showed a red circle, outlining the radar entirely.

"We're surrounded," he said, glancing around.

"I can't see them." Nathan said, looking frantically in all directions.

"They're there." Zeke growled. "I can smell them." He pulled the hilt of his sword from its resting place on his forearm and it burst into life, casting wicked shadows all over the darkened chamber.

At the edge of his vision in the darkness, Samuel could just barely make out the edges of their tentacles. There had to be dozens of them.

"Breka," he said into the intercom. "Open the doors. Now." He focused on his teammates. "When we go," he said, "Zeke: you take point. I'll be right behind you. Nathan and Blaine are behind me, with Magnus following. Victoria: you've got the rear."

"Samuel-" Zeke started to protest, but was cut short as Magnus began to shout.

"Incoming!" he roared, and Samuel saw the red outline on his radar begin to move toward the middle. But it wasn't just an outline anymore. He could only watch as his radar literally began to fill up with red color. They weren't even appearing as dots anymore. They were appearing as exactly what they were: a flood.

"Let's go!" he shouted. "Move for the doors, now!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: And so this one ends. Again, I'm working on the next one, but I can't make any promises. I have a website I'm working on for my Political Rhetoric class (it's actually a Writing Tutorial for aspiring writers, based on Halo FanFiction...so I'm thrilled about it), a paper due Tuesday, Spanish homework that's just decimating my time (AND my GPA, for that matter), along with finals next week. So...wish me luck, 'cause if I die, you don't get to read the end. ;) Talk to you all later! Leave me a comment, if you would! Thanks all!<strong>

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

#### 54. Chapter 53: The First Wave

\*\*Author's Notes: Yeah, I know...it's been eternity. I swear to you all, I'm doing the best I can. I had a few week break for the holidays, but I spent most of it trying to relax and see everybody that I don't get to see while I'm at college. And, now that I'm back, I've got new courses that are proving to be a lot harder than most of last semester.\*\*

\*\*That being said, I have a pair of chapters here (as the rest of the story will be in the same format). One is strictly on the ground (this one). Chapter 54 (to be posted right after this one) will be solely space. I have three more pairs to be posted, plus the epilogue, before this book is finished.\*\*

\*\*First, of course, the reviews (of which there were MANY. THANK YOU ALL VERY MUCH FOR THAT):\*\*

\*\*Mhop12: lol, I just meant that the Flood as a whole are basically immune, since you get four shots to a magazine and I've never once fought only four Combat Forms at a time, hehehe. Also, I got LIVE back up too, so I'll add you just as soon as I get back on my Xbox. Thanks much!\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: Hey! Yeah...bit of an info chapter. Not much goin' on. Thanks very much, btw, for the links you sent over e-mail. Those were great to work from, but I still don't think I did as good of a job as I would have liked (or anywhere near it). As for Vic...well, that's my secret, to be revealed in time. And, when I do, I PROMISE you: everyone here will either love it, or hate my guts.\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: Glad you like the opening to this last segment. Also, thanks for the luck...Lord knows I needed it on a couple. And, in regards to Mr. Crichton: amen.\*\*

\*\*Bubbles: Slacker!!! Anyways, yes, I know exactly how school gets. Thanks for the compliments on the opener (sorry it's not really action-packed...trust me, that's my preference too). But, the action's underway, and things are about to get good. Also, gracias for the comments on Nova's intro. I'm really just winging it with them to a point. Still, it's good to know that they've been taken to well. Thanks very much for reviewing, and I hope you like what's on the way.\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey, thanks a lot for the offers. I know who to call in the event that I run into a roadblock (although, you should know...this last one had nothing to do with the Flood but, rather, with my own idiocy and inability to write things up to par, lol). Thanks much for your compliments, and enjoy!\*\*

**\*\*Bashbro:** Thank you much! I'm a little slow as of late, but Zulu Company will never die! I will finish this book! hehehe.\*\*

**\*\*Eternity of Night:** Ummm...thank you? lol. Glad you're enjoying it, at least. haha\*\*

**\*\*ching965:** Hey! Thank you very much for the compliments. I'd hardly call this the "greatest story" anywhere...but, it does make my day to hear. Thanks for reviewing, and I hope you'll stick around.\*\*

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** College DOES suck. Hands-down. Glad you liked the chapter (though they're getting shorter...and I HATE that). Hopefully you'll also enjoy these next ones. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*Gormanuyai:** Oh, my favorite reviewer...lol. How long HAS it been, huh? And people call me lazy. ;) Honestly, you're just in the MILITARY. It's not like you don't have time and get to do what you want, right? haha. Just messin', man. Hope you get a new roommate soon too.\*\*

**\*\*For the record:** I can make a cliffhanger if and when I want, lol. This "problem for the reader" you speak of...that's what keeps my story being read, haha. If I didn't have people actually WANTING to come back, do you think they'd take time out of their days to read and then actually tell me what they thought? I need that occasionally. ;) \*\*

**\*\*As for the tactics and Samuel shooting over the other Spartan's shoulder:** they just shot a group of Infection Forms, and grouped together before they knew what it was. Blaine even had time to pat Nova's member on the back out of mockery. They're all close together because of that particular moment, nothing else.\*\*

**\*\*Anyways,** I'll chat at you later. Take it easy over there, alright?\*\*

**\*\*Redflame101:** The Spartans do have an infrared setting on their visors, but they've never been favorites before (since they were fighting Covenant, and a moderate amount of plasma would easily short out the system and leave them temporarily blind). They'll get some use here, I promise you that. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** haha! Glad to hear that I've got a few who won't quit on me, no matter how long I make you guys wait (so sorry again...). And to answer your question: yes, something is "wrong" with Vic, but that's all I'll say. As, clearly, she's not acting at all like herself in the last chapter. Sorry the chapters are so short...it's just the way things have worked out. But, short or not, the suspense is not for nothing, I swear it! Thanks very much for reviewing, and enjoy!\*\*

**\*\*vernox:** Yeah, I feel bad about joking around about cliffhangers, then turning around and being gone for a month. Things just got busy, and this ground chapter really hit me like a ton of bricks. Still, good to know that I'll always have someone reading. ;) The last one was kinda dry, I know...but, I hope that you guys like these next couple. Short? Yes. BUT, I made sure to include plenty of action and a little bit of the Zulu-based antics that we've all come to expect. Thank you for reviewing! Hope you like it!\*\*

**\*\*Lecter42:** Yes...I was shocked about Michael Crichton too. Makes me sad. And...I suppose I can forgive your transgression against Jurassic Park, since you did at least choose another awesome work. ;) hehehe. As for my story: I'm working on Nova and their incorporation. It may not be perfect, but I promise you that I'll do my best, and keep them serving a part. Though...and this goes to everyone...give me some rope, lol. I need them. They're vital. Thanks very much, and I hope to hear your thoughts on these that are on the way.\*\*

**\*\*Ophir:** Hey! Good to hear from you! I'm glad you like what I've done with the story for the most part (minus Nova which...I have my reasons, I just have to try and bring them in the right way). As for the ranks...I honestly have no idea. I've had a hard time figuring out the exact requirements for rank to change in the Armed Forces, much less what they are in the Halo universe. I try to avoid rank with the Spartans. Basically: they report to Samuel, and Samuel then in turn reports to whoever is giving them their orders. Anyways, hope you like what I've got coming in. Be careful out there and take care of yourself. Talk to you whenever you get a chance. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*the-super-saiyan-jedi-again:** Sorry about the cliffhanger...there's gonna be a bit of that in my stories, lol. This is the last segment in this book. The sequel will pick up later. Also, you're right about Vic: something is wrong. But I can't tell yet. Sorry. Thanks much for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*DennisK:** Yeah...no more breaks...sorry about that, haha. To your questions:  
>(1) I can't tell you what ONI did to Vic. That violates my protocol (which is to keep all of you in the dark so that you'll keep reading...my apologies, lol)<br>(2) I don't know about "bundling" stories. I've never tried, and I wouldn't know where to start if I did, lol. Sorry...  
>Thanks for your review though, and I hope you'll stick around and give me more questions and comments!<strong>

**\*\*1 way ticket:** Hey you. :) Glad you liked the last one. And yes, I know: you know the future, lol. Just rub it in why don't you? hahaha. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*ikldmrogers:** Wow...thanks very, very much for the compliments, lol. You flatter me.  
>I've gotten a lot of comments on the characters, and I have to say: that's not my doing. These personalities (minus a few) spent years together (obviously, not the SAME ones, but similar), so I have a really good grasp of how they operate. But thank you, regardless. And the fight scenes...I don't know. They're certainly my favorite thing to write.<br>I'm surprised to hear the L.A. segment was your

favorite...I didn't have too many people tell me that they were really, really fond of that part. Glad to hear that it was good to a few though. :)  
>Anyway, thanks very much for your review, and enjoy what's on the way!<strong>

**\*\*Samus 117:** I'm glad the ending gave you something to think on. And I agree, we need to chat more...but I'm not on as often as I'd like to be, lol. Merry (late) Christmas to you as well, and thank you for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*suripav:** Thanks a lot for all your compliments. I don't think the story is quite as great as everyone seems to think...but, oh well, lol. I'll take it. ;) I'm glad that someone noticed the distinct lack of bold words though...I thought I had far too many and (looking back), I realize that I did. Thank you for your review, and I can't wait to hear more from you on what's coming down the line.\*\*

**\*\*Rini-947:** lol, thank you much. :) I'm glad that you like it. Also...in regards to the characters...you should pick one and cast a vote at my poll, lol, so that I can at least tell myself that people are still voting. lol ;) Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*V0id Drag0n:** Thank you! I'm glad you enjoy it. And, in regards to Ahrmonro and U'svere: they WILL show up again, but not in this story. They're big characters for me, but as of now, they're heading home to Sangheilios. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*islandhopper700:** lol, sorry about the cliffhangers...I don't do it on purpose. I just have a predetermined place where the chapter gets cut. Also...sorry...I can't give the details on Vic. Only time will tell (and a few hints along the way). Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*hellhound cerberus:** Hey! I'm glad everyone has enjoyed the opening. Hopefully though, it'll only get better from here. Sorry for the delay, but I hope that what's coming will give you something to keep busy for a bit!\*\*

**\*\*Samson00:** Late...nah. lol. Just late enough that it didn't appear on the review page that I was looking at! lol. And yes, for the record...you're safe. Barely, but you are. And yes...finally, it's time for my long-awaited plans. YES!!! Thanks for reviewing...and proofing, lol. As always. ;) \*\*

**\*\*WOW...**with that done (sorry that I had to blaze through them and they're not all that thorough...I have class at 8:00 am tomorrow and I need to get done), it's time for the actual work! \*\*

**\*\*I apologize:** this is kind of short. However, the next one (to be posted in less than 10 minutes) is another 4000 to go with it, so I'm still close to the 8000 total. Enjoy!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 53:<strong>

â€" **\*\*The First Wave** â€" \*\*

**\*\*1900 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\***

**\*\*Paris, France - ONI HQ (Rooftop)\*\***

"We have confirmed attacks on five companies," O'Donnell told the Spartans. "Most of them were minor, but the attack on Beta Company resulted in over a dozen casualties. If the Flood attack them again, they'll break clean through the line. I want you to go and give them temporary support until I can pull troops from other locations. Got it?"

"Yes sir," Alexandra said. "Spartans: let's move!" With that, she led the group of seven soldiers into a doorway housing the huge switch-back staircase that stretched all the way to the ground floor, more than 26 levels below.

"Last one to the bottom gets cleanup duty!" Jade shouted, taking off on a dead sprint and literally bracing herself against and bouncing off the walls where the stairs switched directions. Stephanie rolled her eyes.

\_Wow,\_ she thought, running after her as the rest of the Spartans began the descent. Landon and Jason, however, waited behind.

"What are you doing?" Steph heard Alexandra ask them.

"You guys go ahead." Jason answered. "We'll meet you at the bottom."

Stephanie grinned. She knew what was coming.

They had descended another three floors when two blurs passed by them in the center of the shaft, where the stairs didn't cover. Two seconds later, the entire building shook as a pair of incredibly loud thuds resounded throughout the shaft.

"Did they jump?" Daniel's voice echoed in the intercom.

"Damn right we did," Landon answered. "You guys are slow."

"Tell you what," Jason added, "we'll get a pair of 'Hogs and meet you outside the east entrance."

\* \* \*

><p>"That was wicked." Jade said, hopping in the back of the Troop Transport Warthog that Jason was driving. "You guys are something else."<p>

"You know it!" Landon said, revving the engine of his own, standard Warthog as Stephanie climbed in the passenger seat and Angela Browning got on the gun. "Let's roll!"

With that, he put the pedal to the floor, accelerating as fast as possible and taking the sharp turns of the city streets in stride. Jason's vehicle was right behind him, and Landon knew that, for once, it wasn't the time for games. The Flood could have already breached the lines, and no one would even know it unless they made a point to let them.

After five minutes of the kind of driving that would have made Nascar legends envious, Landon suddenly slammed the break to the floor and the Warthog skidded to a halt. In front of them, the Spartans got their first glimpse of Beta Company and the Marines' makeshift cover.

"This is pathetic." Daniel said over the private channel. His head was darting back and forth around the small bit of cover that the UNSC personnel were stationed behind.

Landon was wide-eyed. It was atrocious. There was a single, thin sheet of titanium that was propped up and provided only the smallest bit of cover for the Marines. There were sealed buildings roughly fifteen meters from both sides of the barrier with men and women sporting Battle Rifles in the windows. The seven Marines on the ground that were still standing only had Assault Rifles and a pair of Shotguns.

"This is their defense?" Jason scoffed.

"Well," Daniel chimed in, "we're screwed."

"It'll have to do." Alexandra said bitterly. "We've got a job, so let's get to it."

"Sure," Landon said, stepping out of the 'Hog and readying his Shotgun. He knew that, if the Flood did attack, they weren't getting into the buildings, so they'd have to file through the narrow pass between them, and close-quarters-fighting would be inevitable.

"What's the status of your company?" Alex asked one of the Marines. He grabbed his head with his free hand.

"Hell, miss," he said in a slightly southern drawl, "lost nine guys. Got another three injured," he paused, "and I'm guessin' two of them don't make it. We got next to nothin' in the way of ammo and I just got a message that the Flood are moving around the line in our direction."

"They're coming back?" Alex repeated the man's statement.

"Yeah," he said, "almost like they know we're weakened here."

Landon scowled. \_They do know,\_ he said. \_It's the Flood. One mind controls them all. Whatever damage they did here is public information to the rest of them.\_

"Alright," Alex said, turning away from him. "You heard him! Everyone get ready to-" She stopped, bringing an Assault Rifle to bear. "First wave!" she shouted, and opened fire.

Landon moved forward to peer around the barrier and watched, unimpressed, as they began to pour into the passage. If anything, the blue-armored Spartan was skeptical that these miserable-looking creatures could really be as deadly as everyone had implied.

From what he could see, they looked like standard horror movie zombies that had been left in the ground just a few days too long. Their bodies were twisted and broken in multiple places; one arm had

been completely replaced with huge, ragged tentacles tinted in a sickening green color. A few of them had disgusting, bubbling growths on their limbs, and all of them had the same vile-looking feelers where their mouths should have been.

And the ugly, undead creatures just kept coming. At first, they were pouring around the side at what was at least a manageable rate. Now, however, dozens of them were running and leaping around the buildings, toward the barrier. A few of the gutsy ones even climbed around the buildings until the inevitable happened and someone picked their ugly ass off with a Battle Rifle.

While Landon was examining the incoming assault, the others were pounding away at them with every kind of ammunition imaginable. Stephanie and Alexandra were joining the Marines in spraying the incoming horde with Assault Rifle fire; Angela and Daniel were both wielding Battle Rifles, and only stopped firing when reloading was unavoidable. Jason had the Brute Shot raised at his side and was doing a nasty combination of shooting the Flood Combat Forms and tearing them apart with the Brute weapon's attached bayonet.

Landon and the other girl from Nova, Jade, however, were waiting. They were well-behind the front line, and it was only a matter of time before the seemingly-endless wave of enemies would slip one inside. Between his Shotgun and her Energy Sword, someone was going to have to deal with the threat once it arrived.

"More coming in on the left!" the leader of Nova Company shouted, turning her head toward the new enemies, but refusing to cease her assault on the others. Half the team followed her lead, leaving the Marines to handle most of the right-hand side.

As Landon considered pulling out his M6G and trying to help in any way he could when something soared over his head, landing with a dull thud on the ground ten yards behind him. By the time he turned, the Combat Form had already turned to face him, and the Spartan didn't even have time to react before a pair of giant tentacles crashed into his shoulder, knocking him off his feet.

"Oh," he moaned, standing up as his shield-alarm blared, "bastard!" He put down the Shotgun and brought the M6G up as the Combat Form charged him. Grinning, he pulled the trigger once, and the former human's head exploded in a haze of green mist-

But the Combat Form kept coming. It didn't even slow down.

"Oh shit-" he managed to get the words out right as the undead creature swung its tentacles again. Landon ducked all but one, but the blow was still enough to dent his armor and send him to the ground again.

Landon stood up, growling every curse he could think of under his breath as he pulled the Shotgun back up to his chest. "Now," he snapped, "back to Hell with y-"

The Flood form suddenly detonated in a cloud of green mist, gruesome pieces of it flying in all directions. As the fog cleared, Jason started laughing.

"Wow," he said between chuckles, "you got your ass kicked by just



one! What are you gonna do when you actually have to fight them with what they're known for: superior numbers?"

"Shut it," Landon said, taking a deep breath and cursing some more. "Just shut it." He glanced back to the broken, fuming remains of the rotting corpse-

And he stopped.

Sixty yards behind it, down the street, he watched something jump â€" no, not jump â€" he watched something leap almost twenty feet into the air and crash through a second-story window. Then another followed it.

And another.

"Son of a bitch!" he yelled, turning to the group. "They've breached the line! I don't know where, but they've breached the damn line!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Are you sure?" Alexandra's voice was worried but stern. "Are you positive that they've bro-"<p>

A blood-curdling scream echoed down the street and into the Spartans' ears, only to be followed by a dozen more and countless gunshots.

"That answer your question?" Landon asked bitterly.

"Shit," Alex answered, and Jason knew that she had no idea what to do. Their orders were to reinforce Beta Company.

But if the Flood had already made it into the city, then Beta Company, like all the others, was useless anyway.

"We'll go check on the damage." Jason said, focusing on the Nova Company team leader. "It might just be a couple of them, and if we stop them early, they can't multiply."

"I don't think that's a good idea." She answered. "If we split up-" she paused. "I mean, we're already facing vastly superior numbers here."

"I promise," Jason said, "if it's anything major, we'll let you know." He let out a short, bitter laugh. "Trust me, I have no intentions of fighting these ugly-ass aliens without as much backup as possible."

After a moment's pause, another scream erupted from the streets, and Alexandra nodded once, giving them the okay. Jason nodded in return and focused on the two members of Zulu Company.

"Let's go!" he shouted. "It's time for a little 'Seek-And-Destroy.'"

Two green lights flashed at the corner of his HUD and the two Spartans fell into step behind him.

"What do you think?" Stephanie asked, "couple dozen?"

Jason nodded. "Probably," he said. "I'm hoping that, since we didn't hear anything over the intercom from the Major General, it's nothing large enough to draw too much attention just yet."

He led the small group into a city square, complete with apartment complexes, a small store, and two huge skyscrapers; all of them close enough together that the Spartans' radars could almost get a glimpse into all of them.

"Splitting up?" Landon asked, pumping the Shotgun loudly.

"Yeah," Jason answered. "Stephanie: take the apartments. Landon: take the store. I'll work on the first of the biggies." He pointed to one of the skyscrapers. Two green lights flashed in his HUD, and the team all went separate directions.

Jason examined the enormous building carefully as he entered through a pair of simple glass doors. The first floor was walled in by nothing but clear, nine-foot windows and had row after row of office-style cubicles covering the floor. In the middle of the ceiling, the standard metal material was replaced by a giant skylight and, looking up through it, Jason could see that the pattern continued all the way up the building.

\_Wow,\_ he thought, \_a skylight on every single floor, one directly above the one before it.\_ He shook his head. \_Someone had way too much money on their hands.\_

Something moved at the right side of his vision. Jason hadn't even had time to see whatever it was.

And that fact alone told him exactly what it was.

He raised the Brute Shot and checked to make sure that all six grenades were loaded, then proceeded to slowly move toward the place where he'd caught his last glimpse of whatever was keeping him company inside the skyscraper.

\_Where?\_ He wondered. \_I know you're here. You're around some-\_

A lamp crashed down on the floor less than ten feet behind him, the glass bulb shattering and sending pieces of it in all directions. Jason's eyes darted back and forth, searching frantically for the undead horror that he knew was within spitting distance of him.

"Come on," he whispered, gripping the Brute Shot tighter and listening for any movement or sound. "I know you're here-"

One of the windows that served as part of the building's first-story wall shattered as a pair of Combat Forms charged inside and turned their sights on Jason, firing a pair of Assault Rifles blindly before they were even close.

The gold-armored Spartan raised the Brute Shot and fired a pair of grenades into the nearest Combat Form, causing its decaying body to collapse and implode as its partner continued to charge.

"Not the most resilient bastards, are you?" Jason laughed, drawing

back in time to dodge the second creature's tentacles as it swung wildly at him. The Flood form leapt at him, and the Spartan put both his shields up and rammed them into the oncoming attacker, knocking it the ground.

And before it could recover, he made sure to stick the bayonet of the Brute Shot deep into its chest. Then, with the creature no longer moving, he stomped on its broken body several times to insure that no Infection Form would be reanimating it for a second time.

Looking down on the two kills, Jason suddenly remembered that he wasn't alone in the room. There was no way that the sounds he'd heard and the movement he'd caught had been anything but one of the Flood; that much he knew.

"I'll wait," he said aloud, glancing back and forth. "I got all day."

But he didn't have to: at his left side, one of the cubicles was completely annihilated as a former Marine charged through it, tentacles waving madly as it leapt toward the Spartan.

Jason grinned coldly and was about to stab the creature with the bayonet, just as he had the last one, when he noticed something that made his blood run cold: the creature was carrying none other than the M90 Shotgun.

"Oh shit!" he shouted as the Combat Form landed mere feet away from him and the Shotgun roared once, tearing his shields to nothing and causing him to stagger backwards into another of the cubicles. He raised the shield on his left hand just in time to block another strike from the creature's tentacles, but the force of the blow, combined with his already unbalanced stance, was enough to knock him over and leave him looking up into the cold, dead eyes of the former human. He barely had time to raise the Brute Shot again before the creature pointed the Shotgun and-

CRACK!

Jason heard a window shatter and watched as the chest of the Combat Form simply exploded in a haze of green gas and blood, the rest of its still-intact body collapsing onto the ground, unmoving.

The Spartan glanced to where he thought the sound had originated and saw a broken window at the right-side of the building. Behind it, Daniel of Nova Company was standing still and firm, Sniper Rifle still trained on the unmoving Combat Form.

"Thanks," Jason managed, recovering his breath. "You saved my ass."

"Any time," Daniel answered, letting the rifle down slightly. "The Marines at Beta got their much-needed reinforcements, so we came to back you guys up." Jason heard the Spartan laugh into his helmet. "Looks like it's a good thing we did."

"You're damn right it is," Jason said, laughing slightly himself. He rolled his eyes at the lucky break that had saved his life. "A damn good thing."

\* \* \*

><p>"We're being called back to base," Alexandra's voice echoed in Stephanie's helmet. "Apparently, the soldiers are being spread too thin, so we're pulling back and shortening the perimeter as much as we can."<p>

The female Spartan was puzzled. "We just fended off their last attack," she answered, double-checking the area to make sure that they had indeed done it. "The more of the city we give them access to, the more civilians they have to infect."

It took Alex a moment to answer. "It's not my call," she said. "Major General O'Donnell just clarified the order to me personally, and we are to pull back to ONI headquarters, where we were dropped off, and re-arm ourselves before heading back into the field."

Stephanie's fists clenched at her sides. "Fine," she said. "What can we do for the people that are still out here? Do we have a safe-zone for them; somewhere to take them where they'll be safer?"

"Not to my knowledge," Alexandra answered. After a pause, she added, "I don't like it either, Steph, but it's not our decision to make. We just have to trust that the higher-ups know what they're doing-"

"For a change," Landon chimed in. "Great. That's just freakin' fantastic." He sighed loudly over the intercom. "Come on, everybody; let's get some more guns."

"We'll meet up in five minutes," Alex said. "In that time, triple-check your surroundings and make sure we haven't missed any of the bastards."

"Got it," Stephanie said, echoing the statements of five other Spartans. She turned around inside the small apartment that she was exploring when Alex had first called them. The female Spartan was fairly certain that she had followed something up here, but she couldn't find it for the life of her.

But, if it was a Combat Form, she couldn't leave without dealing with it first. There were still people in many, many apartments in this particular complex, people that had refused to clear out even when given a direct order by a nine-foot-tall Spartan.

\_Not that I can blame them,\_ she thought bitterly, gripping the two Maulers in her hands as tightly as she could without snapping them. \_It's not like ONI is going to watch over them; not like the UNSC has the time or the resources to focus any energy on protecting them or their families.\_ She sighed. The safest place for them, sad as it was, was in their homes, armed with whatever they had.

She opened the door leading outside of the apartment, into a hallway, and was nearly knocked over as the Combat Form came screaming passed her. Before she could even process the event, the creature had run through an open door at the end of the hall, and Stephanie could hear at least three voices screaming.

"Shit!" she growled, charging down the hall. The door somehow slammed shut long before she arrived, however, and the Spartan turned

sideways and put her shoulder out in front of her.

The old, wooden door didn't stand a ghost of a chance against the half-ton Spartan that came crashing through it, two Maulers up and ready to cut into whatever got in the way.

"Help!" the scream came from the left, and Stephanie turned in time to watch the former human swing its ragged tentacles toward a young woman and a little boy who couldn't have been more than ten years old. The two people barely managed to hit the ground before the deadly limbs cut through the air where their heads had just been.

Stephanie tackled the Combat Form from behind, knocking to the ground and digging the twin blades of the Maulers into its abdomen. As it shrieked and attempted to stand, she pulled one of the mini-Shotguns out and pressed it hard into the creature's chest.

BANG!

The Mauler roared a single time, tearing a gaping hole in the undead human's body and destroying the Infection Form within. The now-dead corpse stopped moving immediately, and Stephanie stood up, catching her breath and taking another look around the room.

The two people that she'd seen appeared to be okay. Both of them were immensely frightened and huddling in a corner, but no one could blame them for that. On the other side of the room, however, Stephanie got a different sight.

A man in his late thirties was lying dead on the floor, ragged tears in his chest and with his arms bent at strange angles. His head was twisted farther than it should ever have been, and he was holding a Battle Rifle by the barrel in his right hand.

And then Stephanie realized it. The Combat Form's right hand had been missing, because it was still attached to the grip of the Battle Rifle. The man, who she assumed to be the woman's husband, had wrestled the weapon from the Flood's grip.

And he'd given his life to do it.

"I'm sorry," Stephanie said, turning to the woman. "But you need to come with me."

She shook her head furiously while the boy only looked up at the Spartan with a combination of fear and awe. "We can't leave." She said. "This is home."

"No choice," Stephanie said sadly. "It's not safe here." She glanced toward the man's body behind her, then looked at the young boy. "Take him outside. I'll be right behind you."

Reluctantly, the woman slowly nodded her head and stood up, bringing the boy up with her. They walked carefully to the now-destroyed door, peeked outside, and finally moved out.

Stephanie worked to keep any tears from being shed as she picked a Plasma Grenade from her armor and looked at the man's corpse, his eyes still staring blankly toward her.

This was anything but her favorite part of the job, but, against the Flood, there was no other choice.

"Alex," she said miserably into the intercom, "I'll meet you guys outside in two minutes." She paused. "I caught a bit of a snag, but everything's fine."

"Got it, Stephanie," Alex said, her voice depressed, as if she recognized the other Spartan's tone. "Take your time."

"Yeah," she answered, "thanks."

She primed the grenade, dropped it in the room, and stepped outside.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Yeah, a chapter full of close-calls and melancholy. It's the Flood. Did you expect anything less? That being said, please review (despite the fact that I'm a terrible person for leaving you all hanging for a month...), and I hope you enjoy the space one right after this.<strong>

\*\*ALSO, Important note: This chapter was very short, and I hope to have the remaining ground-based chapters be a bit longer. This one just gave me so much trouble (you don't know the number of times it's been changed, edited, proofed, etc). Regardless, I hope very much that the others will be better.\*\*

\*\*Thanks all, and be sure to read "The Meaning Of Loss" before taking off.\*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

## 55. Chapter 54: The Meaning Of Loss

\*\*Author's Notes: I said I'd have two, and here's the second one! This one takes place on the Assault Carrier, with the rest of the Spartans. No reviews this time (since I covered them in the last chapter), so here we go!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 54:<strong>

â€" \*\*The Meaning Of Loss â€" \*\*

\*\*1900 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\*

\*\*Flood-Controlled Assault Carrier - Outside Earth's Orbit\*\*

"Let's go!" Zeke shouted from the front of the group as he led them down the near-pitch black hall. "Hurry your asses up!" Blaine watched as he cut through another pair of rotting Combat Forms that jumped in his way.

He glanced back to see Victoria and Magnus trying to hold the tidal wave of undead creatures behind the group at bay.

"How much further?" the white-armored Spartan asked into his helmet, holding his hammer high above his head, threatening to completely annihilate any Flood form foolish enough to come within range.

"We've got two more large rooms," Samuel said, "plus ten more solid minutes of hallways and corridors."

"Great," he answered sarcastically. "Just freakin' fantastic!" he watched a trio of Combat Forms emerge from a doorway on the right, and sent the hammer crashing down onto them, sending decayed flesh in all directions.

"Demon says the next room is up ahead," Zeke snapped. "According to him, we've got a Hell of a welcome waiting on us."

\_Of course,\_ Blaine thought, turning to make sure that the younger Spartan, Nathan, was still behind him. The green-armored soldier didn't have quite the experience that Zulu Company had developed, and while it didn't show in his accuracy or efficiency, it was blaringly obvious in his attitude.

He moved in quick, sometimes agitated motions, waving the Shotgun around frantically, looking for a target. It didn't hurt him, per se, but it certainly wasn't helping him keep his mind alert.

"Here's the door!" Zeke shouted. Then, "come on, Sangheili! Get this damned door open!"

A second later, the red light emanating from one end of the darkened hall changed to blue, and Blaine heard the door slide open. Zeke charged through, with Samuel right behind him. Blaine let Nathan go first, then went just inside the doorway and waited for Magnus and Vic to go through.

"Now," he roared, bringing the Rocket Launcher to bear and facing the oncoming horde of Flood, "back to Hell!" He launched two shots into the group, and was shocked when four more explosions sounded from within, blowing large chunks of deteriorating flesh everywhere.

"Come on, Breka!" Sam shouted. "We need that door shut!"

"I am trying, Demon." The Elite answered, his voice echoing in Blaine's helmet even as a new group of Flood began to charge toward him from the hall. "The Parasite is in the system. I cannot-"

The door suddenly slid shut, stopping the next undead wave.

Blaine let out a large sigh, leaning against one wall of the room and looking around. It was a three-story hangar, albeit an empty one.

"Thank God," Samuel said, his voice barely a whisper. "And thank you, Breka." He added.

"Of course, Demon," he answered. "Now hurry! The Parasite will not be stopped for long!"

"Split-lip's right," Zeke growled. "I smell more of them." He turned to Victoria. "Can you smell that?"

The indigo-armored soldier seemed sidetracked for a moment. "What?" she asked, her voice almost confused. Then she answered, "oh, yes. I do."

Blaine cocked his head. That behavior was not typical of Victoria. She was focused, collected, ready to-

A shriek resounded from one corner of the giant room that they'd found themselves in.

"Damn it!" Magnus snapped. "Can we catch a break?"

No sooner had the giant Spartan said the words than a half-dozen glowing red doors changed colors on all three floors of the hangar, and the Flood began to pour from them by the dozens.

"Oh shit!" Nathan shouted from directly behind Blaine, and the roar of a Shotgun echoed around the room. The white-armored soldier turned in time to watch Nathan get mercilessly flung into the nearby wall by a massive form behind him.

"What the Hell is that?" Blaine shouted, looking at the towering form. It was easily as tall as a Hunter, and built in a similar fashion. It was a hulking biped with two huge arms and a strange opening with small tentacles emerging right where the mouth should have been.

"Hell if I know!" Magnus said, raising his arms. "But I'll bet you it doesn't respond well to burning green plasma." He fired one blast from each of his arms, hitting the creature right in its "face."

Before the green haze had even cleared, it lumbered out of the smoke and lashed out with one of its giant arms, straight in Blaine's direction. He put both his arms out and caught the strike, but the Flood form was insanely strong, especially for an undead zombie.

"Demon says it's called a Tank Form." Zeke said, and Blaine heard a series of Pistol-shots as the rest of the Flood in the room charged the small team. "It's not a corpse, but rather just a big glob of Flood biomass."

"Oh yeah," Blaine muttered, forcing the giant arm away and leaping back as the Tank Form took another swing. "Well, now it's gone and pissed me off!" He pulled the hammer from his back, lunged forward and brought it down directly on the new enemy's face, sending it crashing into the ground.

Blaine was about to hit it again when the creature suddenly seemed to melt, all of its form liquefying and clumping together in a large squirming mass of undead matter.

"What the Hell?"

A second later, the liquid gathered and solidified â€



In the form of what looked like a damned spider.

"Alright," Blaine said bitterly, scowling at the creature, "I've had enough of this shit." He reached down to grip this new form, but before he could get his hand even close, it suddenly leapt away from him, landing solidly fifteen feet away. Then it jumped again, latching onto a wall. "What in--"

"Blaine!" Samuel roared. "Forget the freakin' spider! We've got major problems here!"

The cybernetic Spartan turned around to see wave after wave of Flood forms rushing toward them, their bodies ragged and torn and half-decayed. Some were clearly former Elites. Others were Brutes. There were even a couple of humans in the mix, though Blaine couldn't understand how or why.

"All in favor of getting the Hell off this God-damned carrier right now, say aye!" Zeke barked, leaping into the first group and slicing like mad. Victoria was doing almost exactly the same thing, move for move, cutting into everything within her reach.

"Aye!" Nathan's voice echoed, and the Shotgun roared again.

"Double-aye!" Magnus shouted, taking the Heavy Machine Gun from his back and spraying the incoming waves even as the rest of the group moved to stay well out of the way.

Blaine shook his head in disbelief. There had to be over a hundred of them.

"Everybody down!" Magnus roared, and broke loose with the chain gun again. Dozens and dozens of rounds soared through the air and struck down any of the undead horrors unlucky enough to be caught in their paths. Zeke fell flat on the ground, pulling Victoria down with him as the storm of lead passed over their heads, decimating more of the horde.

Several seconds later, Magnus stopped firing, allowing the gun to cool down as the smoke cleared from the room. Blaine took a deep breath, surveying the damage.

Each of the Combat Forms had been completely obliterated, their bodies blasted into so many rotted pieces that it was impossible to guess on which corpse each part had started. Bits of green dust and gas still hovered inside the room.

"Damn," Blaine said, smacking Magnus casually on the shoulder. "Not bad."

Magnus nodded, still holding the gun at his waist, ready to fire again.

"Let's go." Samuel's voice sounded inside the Spartans' helms. "We've got a long way to go yet."

\* \* \*

><p>The next series of halls and corridors were covered without much

trouble, and Magnus started to feel like they just be able to make it after all. When Zeke reached the door to the next hangar, the screams of what sounded like a thousand Flood forms echoed around them.<p>

"Are you sure we want to go in there?" Nathan asked, peering into the darkened room. Only a dim, purple glow provided any light to the enormous chamber.

Samuel muttered something, said "come on," and brought both his Shotguns to his chest as he led them into the next hangar. Magnus could tell how much pressure had to be on the other Spartan for him to be so short and stoic.

"More of them," Zeke growled as he readied the Energy Sword. "Judging by the stench," he added, "a lot more."

Instantly, Magnus activated the infrared setting on his visor. He hated using it, as did most of the Spartans, because sources of extreme heat, or even Covenant weapons such as a Plasma Rifle could temporarily blind the user.

But, it had its uses.

For one, Magnus could now see them: over sixty Combat Forms perched on various levels of the hangar, staring down at the Spartans, unmoving. Several of them were armed, an intimidating change after the last wave.

"Since when did these bastards have weapons?" Blaine scowled.

"Since now," Samuel answered bitterly. "Get ready."

Something moved on the right side of Magnus' vision, and he turned in time to see one of the little spider-like Flood, what Zeke had said were called "Stalkers," leaping onto the wall behind Victoria.

Before he could even shout the female Spartan's name, the creature had liquefied and began to transform, still latched onto the wall.

"Vic, behind you!" Nathan's words came as the Stalker finished transforming, changing into yet another strange creature. This one had the standard Flood "mouth" of sorts, along with two short "legs" attached to the wall, several sharp protrusions near the "mouth," and finally a large, slightly-curved extension that came from the creature's back and went upwards.

And that extension was what caught Magnus' eye. It was covered from top to bottom in dangerous-looking spikes.

"It's a Ranged Form!" Zeke yelled, and Magnus was puzzled for a moment.

\_Why is called a Rang-\_

He had his answer. That second, the new enemy began unloading spikes from its back as if it were its own chain gun. Victoria was instantly on the move, dodging this way and that to try and keep from being

impaled by them.

BOOM!

The new enemy detonated in a haze of smoke as Magnus fired a pair of Fuel Rods in its direction.

"You alright?" he asked, looking at the other Spartan.

"Yeah," she said, her voice still oddly distant. "I'm fi-"

"Less talking, more shooting!" Blaine roared, putting his Rocket Launcher on his right shoulder and firing twice into the now-approaching wave of Flood Forms. Magnus glanced around. They were coming still coming.

All of them were coming. They were leaping down from the upper floors and pouring in from the sides.

"We're surrounded!" Samuel shouted, and he raised the Spartan Laser to his shoulder.

"So much for a break, eh?" Zeke's voice was bitter but otherwise emotionless as he activated his camouflage and leapt into a group of Combat Forms approaching from the Spartans' right-hand side. After four seconds of half-cloaked, air-slicing movements, nineteen Combat Forms were in pieces, and the black-armored soldier had pulled out a pair of Pistols. Before Magnus could blink, he was firing like mad, knocking Flood Forms to the ground one-by-one, even as-

BOOM!

Once again, Magnus' thoughts were interrupted, but this time it was by a searing red laser that tore clean through the chamber, from one side to the other, utterly destroying anything in its path. Samuel had swung sideways as he fired it as well, to give it even more destructive potential.

But the Flood kept coming.

Seconds later, the Spartans were reduced to hand-to-hand combat as a veritable sea of undead creatures wound up among them, swinging their tentacles and firing with whatever weapons they happened to be carrying.

Magnus was only thankful that the majority of their weapons were small; nothing but Brute Spikers, Plasma Rifles, and even the occasional SMG.

Something crashed into the giant Spartan's back, causing him to stumble forward as his shield-alarm began to blare. When he turned, a former Brute, its body mangled and half-decayed, was close enough that he could make out the details inside its ugly mouth.

Magnus scowled and jumped forward, simultaneously pulling the Shotgun from his waist and pressing it to the center of the creature, even as it pulled its tentacles back for another shot.

BANG!

The Shotgun's roar echoed around the chamber as bits of green blood and pieces of the Brute's rotted flesh sprayed all over the back wall, and the Combat Form fell to the ground.

Magnus, nodding and realizing just how fragile these forms were, turned around and charged through the group of Spartans, yelling and smashing his giant fists and arms into any of the Combat Forms foolish enough to be in his grasp. He reached out and punched gaping holes in a few of their chests, searching for the Infection Form inside. When he found it, he crushed it, and ripped his arm out from the corpse, continuing to the next one in line.

Almost two-dozen Combat Forms dropped to the floor in Magnus' wake, but even more simply filled in the gaps, taking their places as if they didn't even matter.

"This is hopeless!" Zeke shouted, and Magnus heard him growl lowly as he impaled three different enemies.

"How much farther is it to that damned Control Room?" Nathan asked, firing the Shotgun in all directions.

"Not far!" Samuel said, planting his foot on a group of five Infection Forms, all of which popped instantly. "Let's head for the door!" He motioned to the other side of the hangar, and the dozens of new Combat Forms and Tank Forms that were standing in the way.

"I'll clear the way!" Blaine said, putting the Rocket Launcher on his back and bringing the Gravity Hammer up again. "Come here, you little bastards!" He roared, charging forward and pushing the Combat Forms out of the way as he raced toward the door.

"Zeke," Samuel said, "you're behind Blaine until the door, then you're back on point. Blaine: wait at the door for us to get through. Nathan is behind Zeke, with me behind him and Blaine following me. Magnus: you're next. And Vic: you've got the rear." After a pause, he shouted, "everybody move, now!"

Magnus watched Victoria closely as he rushed toward the door, following the trail of destruction that was the direct result of Blaine and a hammer. The Flood were still charging, but the white-armored Spartan's handiwork was enough to send them flying in all directions, knocking each other over and sending dozen after dozen rolling across the floor.

"Breka!" Samuel's voice echoed again over the intercom. "We need that door open, right now!"

"The Parasite has put up another block," the Elite answered, his tone exasperated. "And I cannot break through."

"Useless split-lip," Zeke growled, pushing his way passed the Flood Carrier Forms and impaling a Tank Form as he reached the door. He took the neuro-chip from his helmet and slid it inside a panel by the door.

"How long will he need?" Samuel asked.

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than the door slid open.

"Well," he finished, "that answers that. Let's go!"

\* \* \*

><p>Ten minutes later, the Spartans were sprinting down yet another narrow, Covenant-style hallway, with the Flood nipping at their heels. Zeke had Demon back in his head, and found himself giving the team constant updates on their progress.<p>

"Another forty-seconds," he said, "and we should hit the Control Room."

"Finally!" Blaine shouted behind him. "It's about time we caught a damn break."

Ezekiel couldn't have agreed more. The Flood were nothing like the Covenant and required a completely different strategy. They would not be intimidated, confused, or antagonized in any way, shape or form. In addition to that, he could slaughter a hundred of them, and the rest of them wouldn't react in the slightest, except to keep on charging him. Killing some amounted to killing none. It was everything, or nothing.

"We're close." Demon said, cutting his train of thought. "Thirty meters: turn right. It's the door at the end of the hall."

"Got it," he answered, then focused on the team. "Right hand turn; then we're at the home-stretch."

"Thank God," Nathan said.

Zeke rolled his eyes. \_Yeah,\_ he thought, looking up, \_thanks.\_ Part of him felt guilty about the sarcasm, but a significant part of his conscience lacked any kind of remorse. After all, with everything that had gone on with ONI and Vic and Magnus, plus the fact that Spartans were then split up and tossed in the middle of a God-forsaken spaceship with the only creatures that even the Elites and the Covenant fearedâ€|

He scowled. It was ridiculous.

"There it is." Demon said, interrupting his thoughts once more.

This time, however, the Spartan didn't mind. He saw the door up ahead and smiled. \_Almost there.\_

"That the door?" the Spartan from Nova Company asked from behind him. Zeke nodded.

"That's it." He paused. "Hey!" he shouted. "Elite! If you're listening, you'd better get that damned door open, and sooner is better than later, if you catch my drift!"

"I am working on it, Demon." The Sangheili answered. After a full three seconds, Zeke saw the light around the door turn blue. "There. Come in, and hurry!"

Ezekiel forced himself to slow as he reached the door. He skidded to a halt and waited just outside for the rest of the group.

"Go! Go! Go!" he yelled, ushering in every Spartan that passed by him, starting with Nathan. Samuel slowed and reluctantly went inside, apparently accepting the fact that things would go faster if he just let the black-armored Spartan wait on the group. Blaine was next, and had just about reached the door when Ezekiel heard Victoria yell.

He glanced behind the white-armored Spartan in time to watch her trip and fall to the ground. Before a single Spartan could even contemplate a plan, the oncoming flood of Combat Forms had devoured her. There was a short scream, and then nothing.

"Ahâ€¦" Zeke stuttered quietly, his voice barely audible and his eyes as wide as they had ever been. "Vicâ€¦" he couldn't believe what he had just seen. And, to make matters worse, the black-armored Spartan had no idea how to react.

Before he could think on it, however, Magnus began shouting, slowing to a stop before turning around completely, less than ten feet from the door.

"No!" he roared, bringing his hands up and pointing them at the oncoming wave. "Victoria!"

It was then that Zeke realized what the giant Spartan was about to do.

"Put those down!" he managed, waving his hands at the giant Spartan. "If she's in there, you'll blow her and the entire hall straight to Hell!"

Magnus apparently agreed, because he put his arms down and was about to take off toward the group when Blaine grabbed him around the waist and began pulling him back.

"What the Hell?" the green-armored soldier shouted. "What the Hell are you doing? Let go!"

But it was no use: Blaine had rerouted every ounce of energy in his suit to the motor functions, and was proving strong enough even to overpower the giant Spartan before him. He effectively dragged Magnus into the room, and Ezekiel filed in behind them, the door slamming shut afterwards.

Blaine let go of him, and Magnus began stomping toward the door, only to be stopped by Samuel, who had positioned himself directly between the other giant Spartan and the door.

"Move," Magnus said coldly.

Samuel shook his head. "Stand down." He said. "You're not going out there."

"The Hell I'm not!" He shouted back, then forced himself to calm down. "Please, Sam: I have to get her back."

"You can't get her back." Samuel said. His voice was sorrowful, but stern. "She's dead, Magnus. I'm sorry. Truly, I amâ€¦but you have to accept it."

"No! I don't accept that, Samuel, ever!" He paused. "I have to get her back. I have to save her. Now move!"

"And just how do you intend to do that?" Samuel asked. "You know that by now they've infected her. By now, they've got her body to use as a puppet, and they'll use it against you."

"And I'll get her back--"

"How?" Samuel was shouting now as well. "You know just as I do that you couldn't lay a finger on that girl. How would you save her? Huh?"

Zeke sighed quietly at the silence that ensued. Magnus couldn't save her, because he couldn't hurt her.

It was a terrible irony.

"I have to try." The giant Spartan said. "I have to."

"Magnus," Samuel said calmly, "we're going to have our hands full just dealing with the Flood that are already aboard the ship. We can't lose a Spartan, have them gain a Spartan, and expect to be able to do this."

"We've already lost a Spartan!" Magnus shouted. "Now, for the last time: get out of my way. I won't take orders from you on this."

"And I don't take mine from you." For once, the brown-armored leader's voice was stone-cold. "Now stand down. That's an order."

At this, Magnus surprised everyone, and raised his hands, pointing them at Samuel's chest. "I won't ask again." He said, and a slight green glow began to radiate from them.

Samuel didn't flinch. "Put them down," he said sternly, "or I break them off." After a pause, he added, "your choice."

For a split-second, Ezekiel wondered if and how the other Spartan would react, but could only roll his eyes as Magnus slowly lowered his arms.

"Good," Samuel said. "Now, I promise you, we'll figure out a way t--"

He was interrupted as Magnus lashed out with his right hand, balling it into a fist and trying to punch the other Spartan. Samuel ducked to the left, made a fist of his own, and sent it crashing into the other soldier's gut, going straight through the shields and sending him stumbling backwards until he caught a raised part of the floor and fell over backwards.

Magnus cursed into his visor and started to get up, only to find himself firmly planted to the ground by Blaine's right foot.

"Stay down," the white-armored Spartan said. "We have problems enough already without you going rogue." He stopped, then added, "and besides: Sam'll kick your ass."

"One lucky shot--" Magnus started.

"And then," Blaine interrupted, "I'll kick your ass."

Zeke rolled his eyes. \_Power struggle,\_ he thought bitterly. \_What a miserable waste of time.\_ He closed his eyes and found that he could see nothing but the female Spartan's face, as compassionate and as confident as it had ever been. Then he thought of the Flood and the infection process, how she would be alive and conscious through the immense pain of breaking bones and her flesh being torn and rearranged; through the tentacles that would form and crash through her shoulder and destroy whatever was already there.

He thought of the Gravemind, gathering her thoughts and her memories, essentially raping her mind of everything it had ever known. His fists clenched at his sides, remembering the details that Cortana had recorded on the small, Covenant data-storage device about her abduction and "corruption." It was the one that the Master Chief had discovered when the Flood invaded New Mombasa. She talked about the pain, about the probing powers of the Flood, about the unrelenting force that worked to claim literally every ounce of her being.

And she was just an AI.

"Samuel," Ezekiel said coldly over a private channel, "we need to talk."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Well, that's all for 54. I'm gonna get the next pair out just as soon as I can (I know, this is another cliffhanger...but really, it's hard to have anything else with the plan that I've set in motion). Please review and, if you have time, two is better than one, since I really want to break 600, lol.<strong>

\*\*Thanks all! Until next time!\*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

## 56. Chapter 55: Perimeter Breach

\*\*Author's Notes: Two more, ready and rearing to go. Yeah, it's been a while...but...well, college is the devil. Now...reviews!\*\*

\*\*REVIEWS:\*\*

\*\*j3ssi3r0ck3r0n: Hey! Glad you liked the last couple! And, to be fair, I wanted a little bit of curious questioning to Zeke's behavior. It's abnormal, after all. And yes, there were a few people who liked Magnus' good beating. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Myranha: lol, I do apologize. I can tell you though...this plot has been worked out from the start, so I promise that if you stick with me, you'll see a method to my madness and a reason for every event that takes place. Also, glad you like the "feel" of it. Personally...I hate the Flood, but they make for interesting writing. Thanks for your review!\*\*



**\*\*killerman83ca:** Thanks for all your offers in regards to the Flood. Hopefully, I should have this down pretty well without too much additional information (save for the proofing and occasional plea for help to my proof-readers...). I'm sorry about Vic, but my plot needs to stay intact, with or without her. Thanks again!\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Yeah...a lot of filler-stuff in the first chapter. I tried to make this one a little bit better (be sure to tell me if I was actually successful, lol). And yes, you were right: I am not done with Vic quite yet. That's all I'll say though, and you can read the details later. Also, hope you like the reactions to come in the next chapter after this one. As always, thanks very much for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** lol, I knew I'd get a lot of "if she's really dead" comments. To be fair to everyone: I'm not really going to address any of them deeply, only tell you all that you can read more in the next chapter. That being said, an infected Spartan...well, I'm not an expert, but I'd expect that you'd be looking at a new "boss" enemy if this were a game, lol. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*Samus 117:** Glad you liked the two chapters! Sorry about Vic...my plot is what it is. And I don't remember mentioning anything to do with ONI last chapter...lol. And, in answer to your question: can't say anything about Victoria except: read on. Thank you!\*\*

**\*\*Benaia Dre:** lol...thanks man. ;) \*\*

**\*\*Redflame101:** Yeah, that was quick, wasn't it? You could almost skip over it entirely if you were skimming. But, I should tell you: I would never copy someone else's Fic, so she's not half-Flood. Excellent guess though! Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*1 way ticket:** haha! You're always so anxious for more info. ;) Hope you like the changes I made to what's ahead. Talk to you tomorrow. :) And thank you for reading, as always.\*\*

**\*\*ikldmrogers:** Hey! It's good to hear people sympathizing with my whining, lol. I do feel bad for the amount of time it takes...but...well, sometimes, as you said, life gets in the way. I'm glad the Flood's appearance hasn't disappointed yet. Hopefully I can keep it up to standard (Please!!!). As for Vic...well, read any other review, lol. But I agree with you: ONI does more bad than good...always. And yes, Magnus kills...well, pretty much everything. What can I say? That's what he's good at. Hope you like what's to come! Thanks very much!\*\*

**\*\*Samson00:** Hehe, thanks for reading through my, uh..."work." lol. I'm glad now that you didn't agree with me when I said to scrap it. Hopefully, between your input and my five-THOUSAND read-throughs, it's fixed to a decent point. Sucks you weren't online tonight...I wanted to run these by you first. Oh well. Oh yeah: you need to get back to writing too! ;) Thanks man!\*\*

**\*\*Suliac Griffin:** lol, thanks very much for the compliments. I'm glad you enjoyed the two of them (I liked the latter...but I wasn't really fond of "The First Wave," even after a dozen re-workings). And yeah...Vic...well, she's not quite done just yet. After all, as people hinted at, that was just a little too quick, wasn't it? And I promise you'll see Nathan later on. He has qualities that I'm hiding

right up until I need them. Thanks a lot for your input and review!

>- Oh, and I fixed the "aye" thing, by the way. Thanks for that.  
-<strong>

**\*\*vernox:** Wow, I got just a positive response to the last two chapters! Haha! Glad you enjoyed them. Vic...well...yeah...read on. lol. I couldn't just up and cut her right out of the story without at least a decent fight, could I? Thanks for reviewing, and enjoy 55 and 56!\*\*

**\*\*Mhop12:** Man, wow...I just now sent you the message. This is the first time I've checked my reviews in forever, lol. Sorry about that. Thanks for the review though!\*\*

**\*\*Jackals:** Hey, thanks! Yeah, sorry about Vic. But, sacrifices must be made, right? Thanks very much for your review!\*\*

**\*\*Tolen:** Hello, and thanks very much for the compliments. Glad to hear that someone new is enjoying my story as well. As for Victoria: I do apologize. As I answered to another reviewer, however: I promise that everything in my plot has a specific purpose, and that everything that happens with her will have a profound impact on the future of Zulu Company. Thanks again for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*the-super-saiyan-jedi-again:** lol, sorry...cliffhangers are my thing. And Vic...well, read on, and see for yourself what the future holds. Sorry, can't reveal anything early. The suspense and keeping you all in the dark...in the words of House: "Helps my process."

>Just kidding...but, I still can't say anything. Thanks for reviewing, and enjoy the upcoming chapters, and soon, the end of  
<span>The Last Stand<span>.\*\*

**\*\*Jeremiah Rogers (AKA: MY FREAKIN' ROOMMATE!):** You. Are. A. Collosal. Pain. lol. But, FINE:\*\*

**\*\*TO ANYONE READING:** Some credit for a select few of the events at the end of this story goes to my roommate. These include:

>(1) A part of the timeline regarding the Flood aboard the Assault Carrier and how they tie into the ones on the ground.<br>(2) The name "Breka."\*\*\*\*

>(3) The name "Alexandra."<br>(4) The name "Daniel."

><strong>(5) The name "Jade."

>(6) The name "O'Donnell."<br>[He's good with names]\*\*\*\*

>(7) The word "oozing" in this chapter.<strong>

**\*\*There.** I covered it all. ;) And there are choice words for you too...jerk. hehehe.\*\*

**\*\*THERE!** That being done...to the next chapter! And, to Paris!  
\*\*

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 55:<strong>

â€" \*\*Perimeter Breach â€" \*\*

\*\*2000 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\*

\*\*Streets of Paris, France\*\*

Landon took point as the seven Spartans sprinted through the streets of Paris, away from the perimeter of the city and toward ONI headquarters. Stephanie and Jade had both originally brought along a few civilians, but they were quickly dropped off at the nearest sealed building that the team could find.

It sucked, but the simple fact was that they didn't have the manpower to spend any extra effort on protecting a few innocents.

"Why exactly didn't we take a 'Hog?" Landon asked as he rounded another street-corner, Shotgun drawn. He could see ONI HQ in the distance, but it was still several miles away.

"We left it for the Marines," Daniel answered with an ounce of disdain. "Don't look at me; sure as Hell wasn't my decision."

Jason sighed loudly. "We need to find a ride," he said, "we're not making good time at all."

"Thanks for that, Captain Obvious," Landon answered with a laugh. "But where exactly do you expect to find a 'Hog in this Hellhole?"

"Not a 'Hog," Angela said suddenly, stopping in her tracks. She pointed to a large, open, four-story structure on the East side of the street: a garage. The inside, at first glance, was bare, but Landon could just barely make out what looked like-

"Mongooses!" Jade shouted, clapping her hands. "That's what I'm talking about!" She led the group as they sprinted toward the garage and the ATVs.

"Six of them," Alex said, slowing to a stop and glancing in all directions, doing the routine perimeter-check. "Too bad we have seven Spartans."

"Just means one of us gets to ride." Landon said, glancing around.

"I say we make Daniel ride," Jade said. The other Spartan scoffed and started to speak, but she interrupted him, "you never could drive worth a damn." She said mockingly.

"That's it then," Alex said. "Daniel: hop on and get your Battle Rifle in case we need to actually shoot something."

"Yeah," Daniel answered bitterly, "sure." There was a loud 'click' as he readied his Battle Rifle and climbed onto the back of her ATV.

"Stay close," Jason said, grabbing his own Mongoose.

"Agreed," Alex added sternly. "We need to get back ASAP, so no screwing off." She looked directly at Daniel and Jade.

"No problem, boss-lady," Daniel said. "Now let's get this show on the road!"

Landon nodded and fired up his own ATV, leading the group out of the garage and back out, onto the open streets.

They drove in utter silence, save for the humming of the engines, for several minutes. Daniel was constantly scanning surrounding buildings and alleyways, looking for any sign of the Flood.

Landon didn't see any. He saw a lot of other things though: civilians, abandoned vehicles, open doors to apartment complexes, open manholes along the street, leaking disgusting gas from the ancient sewers up into the city.

A crackle of static in his helmet drew his eyes back to the road ahead and his mind back to the mission at hand. Then, a second later, the Major General's voice could be heard.

"Spartans," he said coldly.

Landon knew immediately that bad news was on the way.

"Sir?" Alex asked.

"Forget the return to base," he said. "I need the seven of you out in the field. We've had a major breach of the perimeter, and I've got Flood running rampant inside my city."

"Excuse me?" Jason asked. "Sir, where did they break the line?"

The General scoffed. "Wish I knew, Spartan," he answered. "None of the lines have reported a breach, and everyone's checked in. All attacks on the outer lines have completely ceased, but now I have soldiers throughout the city being ambushed and killed seemingly from nowhere."

"Shit," Daniel said suddenly. "Stop! Stop the damned quad!"

Jade's ATV screeched to a stop, and the others followed close behind.

"One moment, General," Alex said. "We've got company."

"Understood," O'Donnell said. "Take care of it; get a hold of me again after."

"Sir, yes sir."

"See something?" Stephanie asked, looking directly at Daniel.

The other Spartan nodded, looking up at a nine-story structure at the far end of the street with the Battle Rifle in his hands. Apparently, the weapon lacked the scope he needed, because he handed it to Jade and pulled the Sniper Rifle from his back.

Landon squinted, looking up at the highest stories of the building, trying to find whatever it was that Daniel had seen.

CRACK!

The smoke trail went up to the eighth story, shattered a window, and hit whatever terrible, shrieking creature was on the other side. There was a loud, inhuman scream, and then nothing.

"Combat Form," Jason scowled. "How the Hell did they breach the line?"

"General," Alex said, ignoring Jason's futile question. "We located and dispatched a single Combat Form, but we have no idea of knowing how many are around here or where the major attacks are taking place. Please advise."

"Your power is wasted out there." The General said bitterly. "I just got a report of a major attack on a warehouse we were using as a weapons cache for soldiers. We've got three other warehouses just like it also in use, and I need each and every one to stay under our control." He paused. "I already lost two of them when we pulled the line back."

"Where is it, sir?"

"It's about a half a click south of your position, right on the East side of the river, across from the French Museum of Natural History and next to an old abandoned power-plant of some kind."

"We'll find it, General." Alex said. "When we do, our orders are?"

"Clear it." O'Donnell answered bluntly. "I've lost all contact with the Marines inside, so, in accordance with HIGHCOM, I'm to assume the worst. Your job is to go and clear the weapons cache of hostiles so that I can send in my other troops to get re-armed. Understood?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Good," he said. "And if you find anything hinting at how in God's good name these bastards breached my lines, I want to know about it, ASAP."

"Understood, sir," Alexandra said.

"Alright, Spartans," the General answered. "You have your orders. Get to it!"

\* \* \*

><p>It took the group less than ten minutes to reach the warehouse, and almost no time to find it amongst the half-a-dozen other structures in the area.<p>

To be fair, however, the warehouse was the only building in the area with what amounted to liters of blood splattered along the outside and the broken bodies of multiple Marines littering the ground, along with over a dozen dead, rotting Combat Forms.

"You'd all better be loaded." Stephanie said, checking her Maulers. "We don't have the luxury of wasting time."

"Don't need to tell us twice," Angela said, pumping her Shotgun.

"I want two pairs and a trio," Alex said. "Daniel: you're with Jade. Landon and Jason: partner up. Stephanie, Angela and I will group up too."

Stephanie wasn't entirely sure how she felt about taking orders from anyone other than Samuel, but quickly dispelled the resentment. There was a lot more at stake than her personal preferences.

Alex continued to give commands. "The warehouse is composed of two stories," she said. "I want Daniel and Jade up top. The rest of us will split up and cover the bottom." She paused. "If anyone encounters anything that even has the possibility of doing major damage, drop the rest of us a line." She paused. "No exceptions."

"Sure," Daniel said.

A second later, both he and Jade activated Energy Swords.

"Woah!" Jason said suddenly.

"You've gotta be kiddin' me," Landon laughed, looking at Daniel. "An asshole with a Sniper Rifle and a sword? Are you sure we left Zeke on the ship?"

"What the Hell are you babbling about?" Daniel asked. Then he looked down at the blade. "I'm not normally a big fan," he said, twisting his wrist and tilting the blade. "I just brought one along this time becauseâ€|wellâ€|look what we're fighting." He shrugged.

Landon sighed and Stephanie felt a little bit better about her momentary dÃ©jÃ  vu from a second ago. She wasn't sure she could handle another Zeke without Samuel around to play peacemaker and Blaine to play enforcer.

\_Or at least threaten to play enforcer,\_ she thought with a grin. It faded quickly, however, as she suddenly remembered the rest of the team and where they were. Suddenly, she wanted more than ever for them to be back home.

"Alright," Jason said, turning to Alex before facing Landon. "Let's move out."

The blue-armored Spartan nodded and followed Jason to the wall of the warehouse, where they waited less than two seconds before kicking it open, bursting in with a Shotgun and a Brute Shot raised and ready to fire.

"Clear," Jason said, his voice resounding in Stephanie's helmet.

"Same here," Landon added. "Let's get to work."

Jade and Daniel filed in first, with the last three Spartans covering the rear and following them inside the large, deserted building. Stephanie entered last, and immediately closed her eyes for a second at the overpowering stench that was permeating the building.

"Hit the stairs," Alex said, not bothering to focus on any Spartan in particular, but clearly addressing the two she'd designated for the second story. "Daniel: what are you doing if you find anything deadly?"

"Calling you, boss-lady," he said innocently.

"When have we done anything else?" Jade asked, her voice just as deceiving.

"Don't even start." Alexandra said, and the two quickly vanished, running toward a small set of stairs that was visible in one corner of the building. "Let's just try to do this quickly," she added. "This place gives me the chills." The leading Spartan was glancing around quickly, but still calmly and in complete control.

And, to be fair, Stephanie agreed with her. The warehouse had been stripped of its electricity, and so the only source of light was the quickly-fading sun outside. It was after 8:00, so they had another half-hour before the sun was completely concealed by the horizon, at best.

To make matters worse, the entire warehouse was a labyrinth of giant boxes and rows of commercial shelves and aisles. Add to that the horrendous smell and blood-spatter at seemingly-random spots around the room, and it was downright unnerving.

"Jason and Landon: go left." Alex said, pointing to a narrow walkway in-between stacks of large boxes. "We'll go right."

"Got it," Jason said, and led the pair into the passage, then around a corner, vanishing from Stephanie's eyesight.

Stephanie turned away and followed Alexandra and Angela through another aisle, made up of nothing but enormous wooden and cardboard crates.

\_Whatever they used to use this place for,\_ Stephanie thought, \_it's old as Hell.\_ She glanced around, looking for some indication to what some of the boxes might be holding, but couldn't find writing anywhere, except for a small excerpt in French, that she couldn't read.

"Did the General tell you anything else?" Angela's voice echoed in Stephanie's helmet, but she assumed that she was talking to Alex.

She was right.

"About what?" the gigantic Spartan asked.

"This place," Angela said. "Likeâ€¦what is it for? How old is it? Where are the weapons? How many soldiers did he have stationed here? What's our-?"

"Okay, okay," Alex said. "I got it. And no, he didn't tell me anything."

"Of course not," Angela said bitterly, her grip on the Shotgun

visibly tightening.

"Careful," Stephanie said with a laugh, trying to draw her attention away from their lack of information, "you'll break that thing."

Angela sighed, relaxing her grip, but said nothing.

"Guys!" a male voice echoed in Stephanie's helmet.

It was Landon.

"What is it?" Alex said, turning around instantly.

"Oh, nothing," Landon said, "nothing like that. But, I think I know what this place was used for."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Jason added. "Can't you smell that?"

Stephanie knew she smelled something strange, but she'd simply chalked it up to the undead stench of the Flood. Now that she actually took the time and thought about it, however, it didn't smell like that at all.

"I don't know if it was this place's primary function," Landon snapped, "but some part of it is directly linked to the sewers. Consequently, the place smells likeâ€¦well, shit."

Stephanie shook her head. It didn't make sense. This place was too big, was designed all wrong to be any kind of sewage plant. Hell, if it were, that wouldn't leave a lot of reason for the nine-thousand boxes that they were navigating around, would it?

But Landon was right: one way or another, the sewer connected to this place. She was sure of that much now. And the smell seemed to only stronger the further the Spartans traveled from the door.

"I just want to know where they put the damned weapons." Alex growled lowly from the front of the group. She glanced back at Stephanie and Angela, then rounded a corner with her Assault Rifle drawn. "Clear," she said.

Stephanie let Angela go around first, following her lead and double-checking behind them.

There was nothing. Not a single Flood form, of any kind, had shown itself inside the forsaken structure within which they'd found themselves, not even a damned Infection Form.

"Oh shit," Landon's voice echoed monotonously over the intercom. "Alex, we found something."

"What is it?" she asked, still doing a perimeter check.

"Well," Landon started. "I think--"

The attack came from the left. Two twelve-foot-high crates were reduced to splinters as a hulking, undead biped sent one of its giant



arms crashing through them, slamming into Angela and knocking her clean through the "wall" of crates on her opposite side.

"What the Hell is that thing?" Alex shouted, unloading with the Assault Rifle. She emptied half a magazine into the beast, but it seemed to be more annoyed with her attack than anything else. Turning its back to her as it lumbered into the spot where Angela had been standing, it faced Stephanie.

The Spartans' new enemy reared back with one of its monstrous limbs, raising the arm above its head, and then sending it crashing down-

The red-armored Spartan ducked to the side, narrowly dodging as the creature's arm embedded itself four-inches into the concrete floor.

"My turn," she snapped, letting loose with the two Maulers in her hands as Alexandra began to unload with the Assault Rifle once again. The creature took oneâ€|twoâ€|threeâ€|four shots from the Maulers, then it started to hunch over-

It spun one-hundred-and-eighty-degrees, bringing one arm up above its head and sending it crashing down on the Spartan that had been firing from behind it. Alexandra literally fell backwards and out of the monster's reach as its limb crashed to the ground.

Stephanie saw her chance and jumped on it: she leapt at the creature, fired another two shots from the Maulers, and then dug the blades deep into the undead horror's backâ€|

It collapsed, falling face-first onto the ground.

"Holy shit," Alex said, catching her breath as she turned to find Angela. "What in God's name was that?"

\* \* \*

><p>"Guys!" Jason shouted into the intercom for the twelfth time. "Stephanie! Alex! Angela! Anybody: answer me!"<p>

Nothing.

Landon was shouting too. "Hey! This isn't funny! What the Hell's going on ov-"

"We're fine."

The voice was Stephanie's.

"Sorry about that," she said. "We were attacked, and I didn't even hear you guys calling."

"Yeah," Jason said. "We heard. Everything alright?"

"Everything's fine." It was Alex now. "Angela's a little bruised up, but it's nothing serious." She paused. "The Flood have a new toy," she added, "built like a damned tank. Keep your eyes peeled, and watch for a mean backswing."

The two Spartans glanced at each other. "Sure," Landon said.

"A tank?" Jason mused, puzzled. "What do you think they meant?"

"No idea," Landon answered. "But if we find it, I'm letting you do all that CQB shit."

"You would," Jason said, grinning slightly.

"Hey!" Alex shouted again. "What was it you guys were about to tell us?"

"Oh yeah!" Landon said, snapping his fingers. "Almost forgot. We found another staircase."

"What?" Alexandra's voice was skeptical. "Where's it lead?"

"Down," Jason answered bluntly, staring at the abysmal opening at the two Spartans' feet. "Judging by the smell, I'd say it leads to the sewers."

"Great," Angela said over the intercom. "Just what we need: Flood and sewer rats."

"Ah, you know our luck," Landon laughed, "only we could find the commonplace between rats and parasites."

"Maybe they're in league with each other," Jason joked.

It was his own words that brought him to the realization: they were in league with one-another, at least, sort of.

"Shit," he said to himself, his eyes wide. He focused on Alex. "Did the General say that they had six warehouses like this one?"

"Uh, yeah," she answered. "He said there were six of them. Why?"

"How much do you want to bet that they're all along the river?" Jason asked. "And how much do you want to bet that they're all located near abandoned power-plants and that they all have a big staircase that leads down into the ground?"

"Ohâ€¦" Landon said, his voice disbelieving. "No freakin' way." He paused. "Shit."

Jason tried to raise the General with his armor's COM-link, but got nothing but static.

"I can't get the General." Stephanie said.

"Me either," Jason growled. "We have to raise him."

"Why the Hell can't we get a feed?" Landon snapped angrily. "Damned COM-systems: completely freakin' useless."

"Alright," Alex said. "Enough. We need to get this place cleared, and we need to raise the General. Since we can't do one, it's time to finish the other." She paused for several seconds.

"What is it, Alex?" Jason asked, puzzled.

"I can't raise Daniel or Jade either."

"Son of a bitch!" Landon cursed. "Is there a reason we can't raise anyone in this Hellhole?"

"That's just it," Stephanie said, "we can talk to each other just fine. Why can't we raise anyone who isn't on the first floor of this place?"

"Hey, can anyone hear me?" Daniel suddenly chimed in. "Hello?"

"Did you find them?" It was Jade.

"Daniel!" Alex shouted, ignoring the other female Spartan. "Why the Hell didn't you answer me?"

"Wasn't my fault!" the other Spartan answered defensively. "Our radio frequencies don't work worth a damn in here! I tried SQUADCOM, TACCOM, TEAMCOM--"

"We got it," Alex said. "What are you on now?"

"Well--" Jade started, but Daniel cut her off.

"Hell if I know." He said. "All I know is that we were using an adaptation of the TEAMCOM to communicate with O'Donnell and his underlings, and I can't get a hold of anyone now."

"Why were you trying to raise the General?" Jason asked, puzzled.

"Oh yeah," Daniel said, "forgot to tell you guys: we found a nice little nest up here, full of our undead friends."

"You guys missed a nice fight." Jade added.

"How many?" Angela asked over the intercom.

"Now?" Daniel asked. "Zero. We took care of it." He paused. "But here's the weird part: there were only a trio of Combat Forms up here. They were guarding a big pile of dead bodies, some Marines, others just civilians. And we caught two more bringing corpses in here."

"What?" Jason asked, disgusted. "They're moving bodies now?"

"Yeah," Daniel said. "Creepy sons of--"

A scream echoed through the intercom and Jason heard something crash to the floor on the second-story, almost directly above his head.

"Jade!" Daniel shouted, then his voice was gone from the intercom.

"Daniel!" Alex shouted. "Jade? Jade!"

Jason glanced to Landon.

"I'll watch the sewer." The blue-armored Spartan said. "Go help them! Now!"

Jason nodded and took off, bounding for the stairs and sprinting the entire way up, praying that the ancient floor wasn't particularly weak anywhere. Reached the second-story, which was surprisingly clear of boxes-

And he stopped.

Daniel was doing battle with a huge, lumbering creature on two legs. It looked like a Combat Form on steroids, except it had no characteristics that remotely resembled a human, and Elite, or a Brute.

This was something new.

The behemoth swung a giant arm at Daniel, barely missing the Spartan as he ducked out of the way. He lunged at it with his Energy Sword-

And it spun, hitting him with its other limb and sending him skidding across the floor. Daniel started to get up, but Jason stopped him.

"Help Jade!" he shouted, looking to the female Spartan. She was farther across the room, screaming and rolling around the ground with a dozen Infection Forms all around her, each and every one of them making deadly jabs at her with their tentacles.

As Daniel stood up, Jason fired a grenade from his Brute Shot and hit the new Flood form in the back, instantly turning its focus from the other Spartan.

"That's right, big guy," Jason said. "Come on!" He fired five more grenades, each of which hit the creature's chest and detonated-

But it kept coming.

"Aw, shit." The gold-armored Spartan said, reloading the Brute Shot as he heard Jade scream again somewhere behind the monster. He fired another pair of grenades, but "as expected" the massive tank before him didn't even slow down.

He put the Brute Shot on his back and readied his Covenant Carbine. Sighting the disgusting feelers that were located where the alien's mouth should have been, he unloaded every single shot in the current clip-

For nothing.

"Come on!" he shouted, looking first at the behemoth in front of him, then at his Carbine in disbelief. "What the Hell does it take to kill you?"

The Spartan put the Covenant weapon back in its place and grinned as the creature trudged ever-closer. He reached a hand to his thigh, found the blue, baseball-sized explosive, and primed it.

"Let's see you survive this, you ugly bastard." He said, and flung the grenade at the alien's head. It soared through the air-

And missed.

But it wasn't due to Jason's throw that the grenade flew harmlessly into a wall before falling to the ground and detonating. No, it had more to do with the fact that the hulking alien had just suddenly liquefied, compressing itself into a ball of squishing, oozing biomass less than one-fourth the height of its previous state.

"What the Hell-"

The blob of undead mass suddenly solidified again, this time taking the form of-

"A spider!" Jason shouted, enraged and looking down at the pitifully-small form before him. "Since when do these things shape-shift?"

He was ready this time, though. The newly-formed creature jumped onto the wall and began crawling, only to be hit with four grenades from Jason's Brute Shot. It fell off the wall immediately before curling up and dying on the floor.

"Jeez," he said, breathing heavily and staring at the creature for a moment. Alex had been right: the Flood did have a new toy. Not only that; that toy could change form and-

Daniel's voice brought him back to the depths of the warehouse. "Jason!" he shouted, his voice pleading. "Help me!"

Jason looked over to see him holding Jade, who was breathing heavily and bleeding from the back of her armor.

"My God," he said, walking up to them. "What-"

"The Infection Forms!" Daniel shouted. "I got most of them, but one of them managed to penetrate her armor! That tank hit her from behind and dazed her, then they came and tried to finish the job!" He looked up at the other Spartan. "She's bleeding, and the biofoam isn't fixing anything. It's just slowing it down."

Jason breathed deeply, thinking. "Okay," he said. "We need to get her out of here. She needs medical attention." He paused, realizing that they couldn't get a hold of anyone from inside the God-forsaken warehouse.

"Alex," he said into the intercom. "Alex, you hear me?"

"Yeah," the other Spartan said. "Are you guys okay?"

"We're alive," Jason said. "But Jade's been hit pretty hard. She needs a doctor as soon as we can get her one."

The leading Spartan took a long time to answer. "Alright," she said. "You guys get down here. We'll meet you at the bottom of the stairs."

"Got it," Jason said, then reached his hand down to help Daniel

up.

\* \* \*

><p>The rest of the group was waiting anxiously at the bottom of the stairs when Daniel arrived, carrying Jade and with Jason carefully taking up the rear.<p>

"She needs help." He said immediately.

"I know," Alex answered. She turned to Stephanie. "Can I count on you to get her out of here?"

Landon could tell that Stephanie was puzzled. "Why me?" she asked. "I mean, of all of us-"

"I'll send someone with you, but I want you to watch her. Please." Her voice was stern, but at the same time, her tone suggested that rank wasn't the issue at hand.

"Yeah," Stephanie answered. "I'll take her."

"I'll go with her." Daniel said instantly.

"You'll stay here." Alex said. "I need your help clearing this place. We don't know what else the Flood have in store for us."

Daniel shook his head, as if to protest, but refrained. Instead, he said, "so who is going with her, then?"

"Angela will go with her." Alex said, turning to the other female Spartan. "And get yourself checked out when you do."

Angela nodded. "Sure."

"That's it." Alex said. "Break's over. We've still got a job to do, so let's finish it and all get the Hell outta here."

"Amen to that," Landon said, pumping the Shotgun.

"We'll catch you guys later." Stephanie said, taking Jade from Daniel. "And I'll make sure to alert the General about his infestation while I'm at it."

"Have fun," Landon said jokingly.

"Watch yourselves." Daniel added, his voice completely stone-cold.

"They'll be fine, Dan." Alex said. "Now, things have changed a little. I still want Landon and Jason paired, but you're with me." She was looking right at Daniel.

"Whatever," he said coldly, readying his sword.

Something about him rubbed Landon the wrong way, but the blue-armored Spartan couldn't put his finger on it. He had the same arrogant, better-than-you attitude that Zeke had had all his life—but there was something more, something about the way he responded even to his own leading Spartan.

He didn't get to ponder it long, however.

"I need you and Landon to check out the sewer," Alex said to Jason. "And please: be careful. We'll be in behind you just as soon as we dispose of the bodies upstairs. The last thing we need is more biomass for the Flood."

"No problem," Jason said. "Just let us know when you're coming, so we don't turn around and accidentally blast one of you."

"Consider us warned," she said lightly.

"Alright," Daniel snapped, "can we please get going now?" His voice was lined with disdain.

"What the Hell is your problem?" Landon asked suddenly. He didn't even know what he had said until the words had already left his mouth.

"Excuse me?" Daniel asked. "My problem," he growled, "is that one of my teammates is injured â€" possibly dying â€" and we're still clearing a building that has little â€" if any â€" Flood forms left in it. My problem, is that-"

"Daniel!" Alex snapped. "That's enough." The giant Spartan took a breath. "She will be fine. You need to get your head back in the game before I politely ask one of them to knock it back in here."

"Why them?" he asked cynically. "You can't do it your-"

"I've done it enough." She said, cutting him off. "Now shut the Hell up and do your damned job." The leading Spartan paused.

After ten solid seconds of silence, she spoke again.

"Look," she said, her tone much more mild, "I know that you're worried about her, just as you would be if it had been me or Angela or Nathan, but you have to trust me a little bit. I chose Stephanie to take her because she probably saved my life less than twenty minutes ago. She can handle herself, and she can handle the Flood."

"So can I-"

"Exactly," she finished. "And that's why I need you here."

Daniel nodded, seeming to calm down. "Alright," he said. "Let's do this."

"Good," Alex turned back to the others, and Landon could tell that she had focused on a link with only them. "I'm sorry you had to be witness to that." She said. "We don't get injuries very often, and Daniel's a little protective."

Jason shook his head. "Don't worry about it." He said. "Everyone's on edge right now."

"Been there," Landon added, "done that."

Alex nodded. "Yeah, wellâ€¦it never makes it any easier to deal with." She sighed. "Head for the sewer entrance; we'll meet you in five."

"On our way," Landon said, and sprinted for the stairs.

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><p>"General," Stephanie said into the intercom for the third time. "Major General O'Donnell, can you hear me?"<p>

"â€œâ€œartan? Hello?"

"General!" Stephanie shouted, her voice much louder than she had intended. "General O'Donnell?"

"Thank God!" he said into the intercom. "Damned COMs have been out for almost an hour. Where are you?"

"I'm outside the Museum of Natural History." She answered. "Sir, we have a Spartan here who is critically injured and needs EVAC immediately. Also, we found where the Flood are getting into the city."

"Two things, Spartan," O'Donnell said. "First: you have a Pelican on the way. Second: what have you found?"

"The Flood entered the interior of the city through the sewers." Stephanie said. "The warehouses you chose had one entrance and were easily defendable, but they also had a passage that led into the sewers, which we assume was used in the past to dump waste from nearby power-plants."

"Shit," the General said. "So we gave them the city when we gave them two of those warehouses."

"Yes sir," she answered. "The others are trying to clear the warehouse, but we've met someâ€¦unexpected resistance."

The General scoffed on the other side of the line. "Forget the warehouse." He said. "I'll pull the line back, inside all of the warehouses, and set fire to each and every one of the damn things." He paused. "In the meantime, I'm going to start a full-scale evacuation of all executive personnel and anyone carrying vital information from the base."

"And our orders, sir?" she asked.

"Your EVAC should arrive momentarily. If you have any other wounded, get them aboard. After that, go and tell the rest of your team to get to theâ€¦" he paused for a moment. "Palais de Justice," he finished, sounding genuinely uncomfortable attempting to speak even a hint of French.

"If I may ask, sir," Stephanie said, "what's there?"

"I'm ordering carpet-bombing runs on the outskirts of the city, along with a ring of incendiary bombs to keep these bastards from getting any closer to the base."



"What?" Stephanie asked, dumbfounded. "That's the solution? Napalm? What about the civilians here? How can you expect to get them evacuated between the fire and Flood?"

"I can't." O'Donnell said plainly, but sadly. "But it's not my call. My orders â€" every one of them â€" have come straight from the top." He paused for a moment. "They won't be saved, Spartan."

Stephanie shook her head. This wasn't the way things were supposed to happen. They were Zulu Company; they didn't "fail" their missions and resort to wiping the slate clean with carpet-bombs and napalm. So many people would have to die.

It just couldn't happen.

"Sir," she said, "is there any other way?"

"If you find one, Spartan," he said, "you let me know."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Alright! That's all for the ground-segment this time. Now...up to where the real action is (kidding...): space! Again, please drop me a line and review if you would, as I'd like to see what you're all thinking about this segment. I had such big plans for it...I want to make sure it all goes accordingly.<strong>

\*\*Thanks!\*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

## 57. Chapter 56: It's Not About Winning

\*\*Author's Notes: And...number two! This one is sad, I'm not gonna lie. Brace yourself.\*\*

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><p><strong>Chapter 56:<strong>

â€" \*\*"It's Not About Winning" â€" \*\*

\*\*2000 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\*

\*\*Control Room - Flood-Controlled Assault Carrier\*\*

"Absolutely not!" Samuel said sternly, working to keep from showing any external signs that he was arguing with the black-armored soldier across the room. "It's not even worth considering."

"Why not?" Zeke questioned. "I can do this."

Samuel found that he was already getting angry, and it had nothing to do with the smaller Spartan.

It had to do with Victoria.

The brown-armored Spartan had just watched one of his team die, right

before his eyes, one that he should have been there to help, one that he should never have assigned to take the rearâ€¦

One that he should have been watching more carefully after her trip to ONI.

"Are you listening?" Ezekiel asked. "I said that I can do this!"

"Zeke, did you just completely zone, or what? Were you not just in the room for the big confrontation I had with Magnus over this exact topic?" Samuel wanted to grab his head in his hands, because he felt like he was losing his mind. He needed a minute to cope, to figure out how to proceed and move on.

And he wasn't about to get it.

"Yes," Zeke said, "I was, but-"

"No buts. If I so adamantly told him that there was no way he was going out there, what in the world would make you think that I would tell you any different?"

"Magnus can't do it." The other Spartan said. "But I-"

Sam interrupted him. "Zeke, I swear, if this is you taking your last chance at a rematch, so help me-"

"It's not!" he snapped instantly. "I swear, Sam, it's anything but." He paused. "When we lost Chris, you told me that winning wasn't everything. For a long time, I couldn't figure out for the life of me what in God's name you meant. I thought you were out of your damned mind." He let out a short, pitifully-forced laugh. "And I'm telling you now: you were right."

"Ezekiel," he said, "I don't thin-"

"Samuel," Blaine's voice interrupted the conversation. "We need to figure out a course of action, and we need to do it now. The Flood are on the move."

Samuel sighed. "That's what I'm doing," he lied. "I'm thinking. Justâ€¦talk amongst yourselves for a few minutes."

"Uh," Blaine seemed to be caught off-guard. "Sure."

"As I was saying," Zeke continued, "Magnus can't do it. He wants to save her, Sam. He wants to protect her and to bring her back and for her to live happily ever after. And you and I both know that that's no longer an option."

A knot tightened somewhere in the giant Spartan's stomach. There were now two things that he couldn't believe. The first was that they were discussing Victoria this way. The secondâ€¦was that he found himself actually considering it.

"Samuel," Zeke said, his voice desperate. "How many times have you told us that we are the only family any of us has?"

Sam smiled despite himself. Maybe he'd actually made a point or two

in his time as Zulu's head after all. Then he remembered, and the smile disappeared.

None of that mattered anymore.

"This is different." Samuel answered. "As I told Magnus: I can't let us lose another Spartan, only to have the Flood gain another one to use against us."

The smaller Spartan must have found something funny in this statement, because a cold, bitter laugh erupted into the intercom. "Trust me," he said calmly, "when I'm done, not only will they not have Victoria to use anymore, but I can promise you that the same rules I applied to ONI apply here." He paused for a moment, then added coldly, "I am nobody's puppet."

Sam shook his head even though he'd been working not to.

"What is it, Demon?" the Elite, Breka, asked hesitantly. "Have you thought of a way to deal with the infestation?"

Samuel sighed. "I'm working on it." He said. "Just give me a minute."

Before he could continue, Ezekiel was back at it.

"Listen to me," he said, his voice as depressed and pleading as Samuel had ever heard it. "You know as well I do that no one deserves the pain and the torment that she's being forced to endure right now."

This caused Samuel to shiver slightly. He did know, and he couldn't have agreed more.

"More so," the other Spartan continued, "on the off-chance that anyone on Earth ever deserved it, you can be damn sure that it wasn't Victoria."

"Nobody's saying that she did--"

"If anybody deserves that, it's me, not her!" he shouted finally. Samuel could hear him panting at the other end of the intercom, working to slow his breathing. Eventually, he continued. "She and Stephanie, ironically, represent the best of this team, and you know that just as well as I do. The two that are from the most conniving, evil race of all time--"

"We're all people, Zeke. Spartans first, but still humans."

"I meant females." He said bluntly. "But regardless, look at them. Stephanie cared more about humanity, more about the cause than most of us could ever hope to. Victoria was willing to put her life on the line for this team in worse ways than just on the battlefield. She faced her worst fears by letting ONI take her, just to keep us out of a war that we were more than willing to fight."

"Don't you think I know that?" Samuel asked bitterly. "I'm the one who screwed up and let her go there."

"You didn't let her do anything!" Zeke barked. "That's the point! She

made her own decisions, and she made them in our best interest." He paused, catching his breath again. "And now it's time that we made one in hers. It's time that I made one."

Samuel sighed. He couldn't believe that he was actually considering letting the black-armored soldier go through with it. However, one thing was still keeping him strong. "I couldn't let Magnus go, and I can't let you go for the same reason."

"That's a lie and you know it." He countered quickly. "Magnus can't help her because Magnus can't hurt her. You and I both know that he couldn't live with the idea that he had killed her, even if he was forced to do it to save her."

"And you can?" Sam asked bitterly.

"Excuse me?" Zeke seemed genuinely puzzled.

"You could live with that on your conscience?"

The other Spartan was silent for a long time. Finally, he answered, "I can live with anything, Samuel. If it has to be done, then I'll do it."

\_Liar,\_ Sam thought. \_You're lying through your teeth.\_

"She's going through pain and torture we can't even grasp, Samuel." Zeke said, his voice distant. "The only way to save her is to put her out of the misery that the Flood have put her into. Magnus can't do that, but I can."

"Our priority is the Flood," Samuel argued, falling back to his very last real argument save for simply pulling rank, which he didn't think was going to work at this point anyway. "I need you, and everyone here, to help put a stop to them."

"What the Hell do you think I'm going to do out there?" the other Spartan asked with a laugh. "What you need, Samuel, is to neutralize the Flood's greatest weapon which, right now, is Victoria Small's body. They have a Spartan that's already at the peak of fighting ability. By all rights, strategically, that should be your first priority."

"You'll get yourself killed." Samuel said lowly.

"Maybe," Zeke mused. He shrugged, "maybe not. But in the event that I do, I can promise you that I'll take as many of those ugly, rotting bastards with me as I can."

"That's kind of a given, with you." Sam said, rolling his eyes.

"Sam."

The voice belonged to Magnus this time.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"You got a plan yet?"

"Yeah, I think so." Samuel lied. "I'm trying to work out the kinks."

"Ohâ€¦"

"Well hurry up, already!" Blaine said. "You've never taken this long to think of a plan before, and if you guys don't speed this up, I'm gonna get the hammer out."

Samuel visibly flinched. \_Did he say 'you guys'?\_

"Yeah," Blaine said, and Samuel knew that Magnus, Nathan, and the Elite had been excluded from the channel. "I may not be the sharpest tool in the shedâ€¦but I am in the shed." He scoffed at the other end of the line. "You two just hurry up and finish your little chat so that we can actually make some progress here."

"How did you know?"

"Because you're taking too long and pain-in-the-ass over here hasn't offered any insulting words in the last few minutes. That means the two of you are talking. What else would you be talking about right now, if not her? And you wouldn't be asking Zeke's opinion, so he's asking yours. Now what would Zeke ask you about that would take more than three minutes, except for permission to go do something that, by all rights, I should be doing because I'm probably better at it."

"You're an idiot." Zeke said bitterly.

"Ah," Blaine said happily, "there's the miserable bastard we know and hate."

"Alright, we got it," Samuel said, and turned back to Ezekiel.

"Soâ€¦" the black-armored soldier started hesitantly, "do I have your approval?"

"When in the world have your plans ever had my approval?" Samuel asked with a short, forced laugh. "But sure, go aheadâ€¦except for one problem."

"What's that?"

"I can't let you go, because Magnus will be right behind you. If I give you the OK after telling him that he couldn't do it, he'll completely reject me as a leader, and I really need the power he's got."

At this, the smaller Spartan laughed loudly again. "You underestimate me, Samuel." He said. "Let me handle the technicalities. Just make sure you're ready at a moment's notice." He laughed slightly.

"And just what does that mean?" Sam asked, scowling.

"Have a little faith," Zeke said. "That is your thing, right?"

Samuel just shook his head. He knew that this was the right thing â€¦

the only thing â€" to be done, but that somehow failed to ease his mind, even slightly.

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><p>"We don't have time for this." Blaine growled lowly, though to no one in particular. He knew that Zeke had chosen now of all times to assert whatever dumbass desire he had to go find Vic, whatever the reason might be.<p>

"Alright," Samuel said suddenly, his voice echoing in Blaine's helmet and everyone else's. "I hope everyone's ready. We've got work to do."

"It's about damn time." Blaine said. "What's the plan?"

"This ship can't reach Earth." Sam said. "That's the given. The only thing that matters now is whether or not we'll get to leave it, or go down with it."

"I will die with this ship to stop the Parasite's spread, Demon," the Elite, Breka, said, "if that is what must be done."

"Don't be so eager to die." Samuel said bluntly. "Frankly, I've seen enough death already today." His voice was dry, cold. "The easiest course of action is to take the ship to a star and let the heat deal with the Flood."

"But the problem with that is-" Magnus started, but Samuel cut him off.

"The Slipspace Drive," he said, "I know. The good news is that the ship's standard engines are already dead." He paused. "Blaine made sure of that when he stripped power from one of the generators."

At this, Blaine was puzzled. "I destroyed the generator linked to the shields, which were fixed."

"Yes and no," Samuel said, and Blaine could hear in his tone that he was trying to get the conversation finished just as fast as he could. "The energy from another generator was rerouted to the shield-systems. That energy came from the ship's major propulsion systems."

"So how are we moving toward Earth?" Magnus asked. "We're not even close to orbit, relatively speaking."

"The major propulsion doesn't work," Sam said, "but there's excess energy that the shields don't use. That's going into the engines." He paused. "The power has to be manually rerouted though, which means that the Flood in the system can't just change it whenever they want."

Blaine nodded. He saw where this was going.

"We dispose of the generator powering the Slipspace Drive," Samuel said, "and then we set this ship on a crash-course with the sun. When we're close, we find a ship and bail."

"And these propulsion systems won't be able to break the pull?" the

Elite asked.

"Demon says they won't." Zeke answered coldly, inputting for the first time in the conversation. "There's so little energy being sent to themâ€|that's why we haven't reached Earth yet. That's why this hunk of junk is so damned slow."

"But, Demon," Breka said, suddenly mildly upset, "I've been unable to get any manual control over the ship's propulsion systems. The Parasite has completely shut me out."

"Already taken care of," Samuel said, glancing to Zeke. "Demon should have no problem circumventing a hundred-thousand-year-old Parasite."

"Alright," Blaine said. "How are we doing this? Do I have generator duty aga-"

He was interrupted as something crashed into the door to his right, the same one the Spartans had come in through.

"What the Hell-"

SLAM!

Something hit the door opposite that one, the only other entrance to the room. In an instant, Breka was at the terminal, his claws moving frantically.

"The Parasite is attempting to unlock the doors!" he shouted. "I do not think that I can-"

Every light in the room suddenly went out, and Blaine's world was plunged into darkness for a seemingly-endless moment as he shifted the setting on visor to infrared.

In that moment, however, he heard the doors slide, and dozens of screaming Combat Forms could be heard charging into the room.

"Get them out of here!" Samuel shouted through the darkness, "right now!"

Blaine grinned and lifted the hammer high into the air before leaping toward the door to his right and smashing the three nearest Flood forms. Another one tried to run by him, off to the right, but he primed a Spike Grenade and sunk it into the former Elite's back as it screamed passed.

The white-armored Spartan sent the bludgeon crashing down in front of him again like he was wielding the Hammer of God.

And, as far as the Flood were concerned, he might have been.

Any of the ugly, undead horrors lucky enough to escape him were instantly obliterated with a combination of Nathan's Shotgun and Magnus' twin cannons, the conjunction of which lit up the room and gave a clear view to the carnage.

He glanced backward to see that Samuel and the Elite, Breka, were just inside the opposite doorway, trying to stop the waves of Combat

Forms that were trying to get inside.

"Magnus!" Samuel shouted, his voice echoing everywhere. "Blaine's got that area pretty-well covered. Get over here and help me!" He paused. "Breka: get these doors shut!"

"But," the Elite started, "The Parasite is com-"

"Do it now!" Samuel said, "or they're just gonna keep coming! We'll keep you covered!"

The Sangheili's Energy Sword faded as he turned and ran back to the control panels, madly trying to find a way to close the doors.

Blaine, meanwhile, decided to save what little battery-power he could in the hammer by using a combination of the handle and his own hands to deal with the ugly bastards that were still rushing the door.

"You know," Blaine said, "I don't remember sending you guys an invitation, and this is a private party." He primed a pair of Firebombs and held them both in his left hand.

A Combat Form that had been a Brute in a past life leapt high into the air, more than five feet above the Spartan's head-

And Blaine's right hand gripped its rotting leg as he jumped with it, pulling the creature down and literally throwing it through the door, into half-a-dozen of its brethren.

Then he threw the grenades.

The Flood's repulsive, decomposing flesh burst into flames that spread from Combat Form to Combat Form like wildfire and cast wicked, burning shadows all through the hall. Between the decaying flesh and the vile green gas that a defeated soldier let out, half the hallway went up, "like a Texas oilfield," as Zeke would say.

"Demon!" Breka shouted. "I think I have it! You must hurry! Get inside!"

"Come on!" Samuel yelled. Blaine pulled back a few feet, making sure he was well-within the doorway as former-Brute charged him, its body engulfed in fire.

Before it could get there, the door slid shut and began to glow with a forbidding red light. The lights slowly came back on as well, fading in slowly first before returning to their usual purple glow.

"Ha-ha!" Nathan laughed, pumping the Shotgun. "That's what I'm talkin' about."

Blaine nodded, grinning ever-so-slightly.

And then he looked around.

"Sam-" he started.



"Zeke!" the brown-armored Spartan roared, his voice thundering like an earthquake. "Where-?"

Blaine shook his head. His teammate's marker on his HUD, the one that said "Z13", was nowhere to be found.

"Breka," Samuel said, "find him."

The Elite nodded and began clawing at the computer terminals and the monitor flashed to a dozen different places on the ship before suddenly stopping.

The black-armored Spartan was fighting in the midst of a dozen Combat Forms, blasting away with his M6G Pistols at a maddening rate until they were completely empty.

Then he switched to the Sniper Rifle.

Anyone else would have needed to have their head examined if they had pulled a rifle with a four-shot magazine on a group of Combat Forms. Ezekiel was an exception.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

He ran in a circle, firing into the crowd of swiping, screeching undead, and Blaine watched as five of them dropped to the ground.

Then the offensive mounts on his arms began to glow with blue-white plasma, and the rest of the Combat Forms' reanimated lives were measured in seconds.

"What are you doing out there?" Magnus shouted once the war was over. But it was no use: the other Spartan had made a note to block out the rest of them. Apparently realizing this, Magnus turned to Sam. "What now?"

"What's done is done." Samuel said calmly, though he felt anything but. "There's nothing to be done about it now."

"Fair enough," Zeke answered, his voice echoing only in Samuel's helmet. "Sorry about the little light-failure back there, but I had Demon make sure it was easy to fix." And with that, he moved out of the view of the monitor, into the narrow hallways of the Assault Carrier.

"Where's he going?" Magnus asked.

And then, it must have clicked.

"Hey! No! Get your ass back here! Zeke! Damn it!" He turned to Samuel. "Open the door. I'm leaving."

"Not on your life." Samuel said. "And yes, I mean that...word for word." He paused only for a second. "I'm not in the mood, Magnus. Now step back," he motioned for the other Spartan to move, "and drop it. I will not have two rogues on my hands, understand?"

Magnus' breathing was shallow, bitterâ€¦but he nodded.

"Good."

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><p>This was it.<p>

Zeke swallowed hard, walking cautiously through the hallway with a rifle on his back and a sword on his thigh.

This was everything.

He had to work to slow his breathing. Somehow, the very thought of what he'd set out to do made him insanely nervous, like he didn't know if he should do it, if he would do it-

If he could do it.

\_No,\_ he thought. \_This is everything. I have to do this. She deserves peace. She deserves someone's help.\_ This was true, he believed, since she had always so willingly given help to the rest of them.

She had saved the life of the red-armored Sangheili, Vano, in Los Angeles; she'd quite possibly saved Ezekiel's life on the Assault Carrier the last time around. She could have very easily saved the entire team by offering herself up to ONI on a silver platter, long after the war was fought and finished.

She'd played 'hero' so many times.

\_And now she deserves just that.\_

The black-armored Spartan approached the end of the hall and a large, blue-lit doorway that slid open long before he was actually close enough to touch it.

\_Alright,\_ he thought, picking up his pace as he got closer and stepping into a giant, open chamber. He sighed sadly. \_Another damned hangar\_, he thought, looking around.

The room was like several others he'd seen the last time the Spartans were on the Assault Carrier: it was enormous, with three levels overlooking the bottom one and pale, dim purple light as its only source of lumination. The only thing that made this one even close to special was that it was completely empty.

"Come on!" he shouted into his helmet. "Where the Hell is she?"

The Flood should have sent her to him by now, by all rights. If they had probed her mind even a little bit, then they would have known all about their rivalry, about his need to beat her, to prove that he was the best.

So where was she?

This was their perfect chance. They could take a second Spartan for their sick, twisted, cadaverous collection.

And yet, Ezekiel Veron had seen neither hide nor hair of a single Combat Form since he'd last spoken with Samuel. He'd put new

magazines in the Pistols to be sure that he was preparedâ€|but there was nothing. Not a damned red dot on his radar. Not a single freaking-

Something moved in the shadows at one end of the room. It was almost completely shrouded in darkness, but Ezekiel didn't dare to use his infrared sensors in case there was a plasma-based weapon anywhere nearby.

Slowly, the form came closer, and Ezekiel felt his blood run cold at the sight before him.

The figure was tall â€" his size â€" and slender, wearing thick, indigo-colored armor. And sheâ€|\*\*it\*\*â€|looked exactly as he remembered. The helmet was on and fastened and the arms hung at herâ€|\*\*its\*\*â€|sides, poised and ready.

Zeke had the rifle drawn in an instant, pointed directly at the head of the creature before him, more out of habit than anything. His finger was pressed up to the trigger, but he held it there calmly.

"Woah," the Combat Form in front of him said, its voice entirely and completely hers. It outstretched its hands toward him, palms open, so that he could see that sheâ€|\*\*it\*\* was unarmed.

"Fire!" Demon's voice echoed harshly inside his head. "Pull the trigger! It's not her! What are you waiting for? Open fire!" The AI left him no room to debate, only kept shouting the same things.

But he couldn't fire. He was curious, as both hands approached the creature's head, and he watched as it unlatched the Mark VI helmet from Victoria's armor.

"Zeke!" Demon was pleading now. Neither of them truly wanted to see what hideous, twisted form was almost certainly lying behind the visor. "Fire right now!"

But Zeke, against his better judgment, ignored him. The infected Spartan before him took the helmet and slowly lifted it off, as if for the first time.

And the black-armored soldier's breath caught in his chest.

She was the same. The Flood had not altered her physical structure in the slightest. Her arms had not been replaced with those revolting tentacles. Her head had not been pushed back to make room for the Infection Form that was undoubtedly taking root in her chest.

She was Victoria Small.

"It's not her." Demon said. "They've refrained from draining most of her calcium because it compromises the host's structural integrity. They're just leaving her this way so that her body will be of use to them longer."

Something about that statement didn't set well with Ezekiel, but he couldn't quite put his finger on why. He didn't get to think about it, however, before the AI continued to rant.

"Her body only looks normal so that they can use it against you! So that they can use her against you!" He paused. "Look at her eyes, Ezekiel!"

He did, and he saw the only thing that that the Flood couldn't fake: her eyes. They were unfocused, coldâ€¦dead.

And it hurt him to see them that way.

Before he could think of a plan, however, one of her arms moved.

Zeke watched as she slowly, methodically, reached down and pulled the M6G from her thigh. She lifted it up, pointing it at the ceiling-

And dropped it to the floor.

Then she repeated the process with the Battle Rifle strapped to her back.

"Well?" she asked, pulling the Energy Sword from her thigh and activating it so that the white glare lit up all the features of her face. She smiled brightly, sincerely, as if everything was back to normal, as if the entire world was exactly as it should have been.

As if one of them wasn't about to die.

"You ready for that rematch?"

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><p>"No!" Samuel shouted into the intercom even though Magnus was sure that the other Spartan had long since blocked all of them out. "Ezekiel!"<p>

They were all watching over a large monitor in the Control Room. It was true: by all rights, they should have been using this time to find the generator, butâ€¦|

It wasn't possible. This couldn't be happening.

The black-armored Spartan had the Sniper Rifle trained on Victoria's head, and no one in the room questioned it: if he fired, that would be the end of it. But Magnus knew. Samuel knew. Everybody knew.

He wouldn't fire.

"He won't do it." Blaine said, shaking his head bitterly. "God damn it."

Over the monitor, Magnus watched with a combination of awe and rage as the male Spartan let the rifle angle downward before strapping it to his back once more. He didn't go so far as to drop it, as the Flood-controlled Spartan had, but he did pull his Energy Sword to his chest. Then, he reached up with his free hand-

"Oh, Hell no!" Nathan said in disbelief. "No way."

"Zeke," Sam said quietly, hopefully, "you're not that stupid. I know you're not that stupidâ€|"

He was that stupid. The black-armored Spartan unlatched his helmet, pulled it off, and dropped it to the floor.

"Oh, come on!" Samuel roared, turning away from the intercom. "Come on, Zeke! What theâ€|heck are you doing?"

Magnus could tell that it was taking every ounce of willpower in the leading Spartan to maintain both his temper and his language.

There was a clash and a brilliant flash of light as the two Spartans collided in the middle of the monitor, their swords and offensive-mounts shining with blue-white plasma as they blocked each other's strikes, one right after another.

And they came so fast! Magnus had trouble keeping up with the speed at which the blades would move, collide, slice through the air again, only to be blocked a split-second later.

He watched as they darted back and forth, ducking, jumping, dodging, slicing-

And they both vanished.

"What the Hell-"

There was another clash and in the glaring light, he could see both Spartans appearing once again as their Active Camouflage failed. Seconds later, they disappeared once more-

And their blades crashed together again, lighting up the room and shorting out whatever shields that they might've had.

It was at that point that Magnus came to another realization: only Ezekiel had had shields. Victoria's armor, when he'd walked in, had lacked any kind of an energy signatureâ€|or, at least, none that the monitor had picked up.

Another clash, and Victoria's infected form seemed to gain the upper hand as she ducked low and spun her right leg, tripping Zeke and causing him to fall forward.

She stood up and was about to strike when the black-armored Spartan put his free hand to the ground and kicked his legs almost straight up in the air, catching the Flood Form in the chest and sending her flying backwards.

The former-Spartan hit the ground, fell over, and then flipped immediately back up to face her opponent.

"You've gotten better." She said, her pleasant, deceiving voice echoing loudly over the speakers.

\* \* \*

><p>"You've gotten better."<p>

Her voice echoed in his head, again and again, but it wasn't the

voice that meant anything.

It was the words.

"You've gotten better."

It was a lie; a bitter, miserable lie. He'd gotten lazy. He'd gotten careless. He'd gotten soft. He'd gotten a lot of things, but "better" wasn't one of them.

So why the Hell was he so easily keeping up with her?

He wasn't winning, per se; far from it, actually. But the black-armored soldier found it incredible how easily, how effortlessly he was holding his own against the Flood-controlled Spartan before him.

It just didn't make sense. He knew as well as anyone else just how out-classed he was when he fought Victoria. She was in a league all her own and, if she had wanted to, she could have left him in the dust every time.

And, to add to the mystery, the infections that he'd seen and heard about from reports all suggested that the hosts became more physically adept when possessed by the Parasite, not weaker and slower.

So why was it so easy?

He dodged another slice to his chest, this one as easy as the rest, and he realized that there was only one conclusion.

She was toying with him.

The Flood were toying with him.

But the Flood didn't 'toy' with their foes. The Flood annihilated and assimilated their foes into their forces. They had nothing to gain by waiting and playing games.

Or did they?

He jumped backwards to avoid another strike, his mind not at all where it should have been given the situation. Ezekiel found that he could focus on that question, that haunting question of the Flood and their motives. He could focus on all the questions about why and how it came to be that he of all people could watch as she was taken and corrupted. But, more than anything, he found himself focusing on the face before him, the face of a friend and an ally and, as Samuel had put it, family.

When he'd signed up to end her infection and, in turn, end her life, Ezekiel Veron had never imagined for a second that he would have to look her in the eyes when he did it. Even dead and cold and emotionless, they failed to draw enough attention from the rest of her features, all the little things that made her human.

His lack of focus caught up with him, however, as he moved just a little too late to avoid her Energy Sword as it came toward his chest. She was swinging it downward, and met no resistance from his

shields as it cut through his armor and left an eight-inch gash across his chest and stomach, stretching from the right shoulder all the way down to the side of his ribcage.

For a split-second, the Spartan was torn. Part of him was frantically checking his body, only to see that the cut was narrow and shallow. It would scar, no doubt, but it was a far cry from fatal.

The other half of him, however, the fighter, the soldier, the warrior—that half reacted the same way he would have if a Brute or a Sangheili had done the slicing: he moved to the right, twisted, and plunged the offensive mount on his elbow deep into his enemy's chest.

Even as Ezekiel began to realize what he'd done, he felt something inside her pop, and the lifeless, detached look was immediately, instantly gone from her eyes. She inhaled hard, gasping for breath, letting go of the Energy Sword and falling toward him as he pulled the offensive-mount from her body.

"Vic!" he shouted, wide-eyed at what he'd done, the pain that he could see in her eyes as she began to bleed from the chest. "Gael," he said, realizing that the AI could simply administer biofoam and—

The AI was in her helmet—the same one that she'd taken off.

Ezekiel checked the compartments on the sides of her armor one by one, looking for biofoam, but they were empty—each and every one.

He glanced over and found that, luckily, their battle had ended mere feet from his own helmet. Quickly, the Spartan snapped it in place—

"You're damned lucky that I altered your magnetic field generators to compensate for movement in my absence!" Demon's voice echoed in his head instantly.

"Biofoam!" Zeke snarled. "Now!"

"Gael used them," Demon answered coolly. "Or, at least, I would have. The biofoam could have slowed the effects of the Flood's infection on her body, maybe given her some more time to fight it off."

"No," Zeke said, now clawing at his own compartments, searching for a biofoam canister of his own. He thought that he smelled something, but it was faint, and he ignored it.

"Right side," Demon said, "second from the top."

The compartment suddenly popped open, and the Spartan grabbed a can of biofoam, opening it and pointing it at the indigo-armored soldier's wound.

"This is gonna hurt," he said, but didn't wait for a response before filling it with the material in the can.

Her breathing picked up and she gritted her teeth, but she quickly

recovered, staring up at him.

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't thank me yet." Zeke growled, looking around. He swore that he'd smelled something. He turned to look at her. "I'm going to get you out of here."

She shook her head. "Talk to Gael." Her voice was getting quieter now, and he could tell that she was working to stay awake. "You have to talk to Gael." She paused, breathing deeply, and her eyes got wide. "They're coming!"

Ezekiel's eyes narrowed to slits as he carefully laid her down and stood up over her, looking around. It was then that he realized his mistake.

There were at least thirty Combat Forms around the edges of the room. He was sure that they hadn't been there when he entered but, given the lack of focus that he'd had, they could have emerged at any time, and he'd have never known it.

"Here," she said kindly from below him. He looked down to see her holding her Energy Sword as high as she could.

Zeke nodded and took it in silence, holding it in his left hand with his own blade in his right. He looked around the room at the enemies that were now circling them like vultures.

Knowing what was coming, the Spartan put a sword on his thigh and glanced down at her before pulling the glistening, golden device from the side of his armor. "Take this," he said.

"What is it?" she asked, puzzled. He was dumbstruck.

"You gave it to me," he said. Then he realized what had happened: the Flood had already taken her most recent memories, including those on the Assault Carrier. It made sense, since this was the current battlefield.

"Then you keep it," she said, forcing a smile.

Zeke shook his head. "Just take it." He held it down low enough for her to take and gripped the sword from his thigh once again.

"I don't" she started beneath him, her voice solemn, hopeless. "Not again" "don't let them take me again."

Ezekiel scowled at the thought. What could reduce a rock-hard Spartan like Victoria Small to asking something like that?

His eyes darted back and forth to the former aliens and humans that were slowly getting closer, thanking God that most of them were unarmed. He counted a pair of Plasma Rifles and a single Brute Shot, but nothing more.

"Here we go."

\* \* \*



><p>Nathan Taylor had no idea what to make of the situation. Nothing even remotely close to this had ever happened to him or anyone that was a part of Nova Company. The circumstances caused a Spartan, a tried-and-true soldier, to ignore protocol, common sense, and even direct orders from his superior.<p>

And now the black-armored Spartan that Nathan had barely had five words with since he'd arrived was standing over the one they'd called Victoria, brandishing two gleaming Energy Swords. His helmet was on the ground again, as if he'd gotten used to fighting without it, and the look in his eyes suggested that he'd sooner die himself than move from his perch.

"Come on!" Magnus said suddenly. "Let's go!" He moved for the door, but it didn't open. "What are you waiting for?" He was looking right at Samuel. "We can help them. Come on!"

Samuel shook his head, breathing heavily. "I would love to." He said. "But the Flood are already in the room. That hangar is a ten-minute run, and that's assuming we encounter nothing on the way." He paused. "By the time we get there, it'll all be over, good or bad."

"What?" Magnus appeared to be dumbfounded by the answer, though Nathan couldn't say he blamed him. The giant had wanted nothing but to help Victoria since she was taken. "I can't believe this!" The green-armored giant clenched his fists at his sides. "You're a coward! We can help them, and they need our help right now!" He pointed at the monitor. "They need us now more than ever!"

"Don't you think I want to?" Now the leader was shouting back, and Nathan didn't know what to make of it. He'd heard Alex yell and scream lots of times. That was just her way. But Samuelâ€he wasn't like that at all. To hear him losing his temper was more than a little unnerving to the sole member of Nova Company.

"No, Sam," Magnus started, apparently as stunned by Samuel's reaction as Nathan was. "That's not what-"

The door on the left side of the Control Room suddenly slid open, revealing dozens of screaming, undead Combat Forms.

"The door!" Nathan shouted, pumping the Shotgun as the creatures began to race inside and straight for the Elite.

"Blaine!" Samuel shouted. "Guard Breka. Breka: close this door!" He pulled up a pair of Shotguns and walked directly into the oncoming flood, blasting them away one by one as Magnus tried to clean up.

The few that made it beyond the giant, green-armored Spartan were met with either Nathan's Shotgun or, in a couple of rare instances, Blaine's bare hands. The white-armored Spartan had put the Gravity Hammer on his back and was literally grabbing the vile, howling creatures by their tentacle-like appendages and tearing them limb from disgusting limb.

As quickly as it had opened, the door slammed shut. Breka let out a very human-sounding sigh.

"I've sealed them again, Demon." He said, turning to Samuel. The

Sangheili began to speak again, but was interrupted.

"They can get in whenever they want!" Magnus roared. "We've got the time; we have to go and help Vic!"

"I'd give anything to help them!" Samuel shouted, taking a step toward Magnus and backing him against a wall, the leading Spartan's Shotguns still tightly gripped in his hands. "I would give my life and everything short of it to take either of their places right now, but this was the way it had to happen! No one chose this; no one decided that this was how it would be. It's just the way it happened!"

"But we can choose now--"

"We don't have a choice now!" Samuel said. "They're too far away for us to make any sort of difference. We could have left five minutes ago and--"

"We'd have made it there!" Magnus finished. "There was a chance--"

"Quiet!" Blaine snapped. "All of you!" He pointed to the monitor calmly. "They're attacking."

Nathan turned to watch as the circle of thirty-three Combat Forms suddenly let out an ear-piercing scream and began to dash for the center—for Zeke and Vic. Before they'd even really begun to move, however, two shots echoed over the speakers from Zeke's M6G, and a pair of former-Elites fell to the ground.

But the rest of them continued to charge.

There was nothing but a blur of movement when they finally converged on Ezekiel, who had all four of his offensive-mounts lit up to their brightest points and his two swords pulled back and ready for war.

Six blades cut through the air at varying heights around him and he ducked and dodged to avoid tentacles from every direction. The sound of a Brute Shot firing echoed over the monitor three times, and Nathan was sure that Ezekiel had taken one right to the back, but if he did, he never showed it, never faltered.

He just kept slicing, holding his ground and planting his feet so as not to budge and inch from over the wounded Spartan.

"Well," Blaine said coldly, "I know one thing: if he pulls this off, we'll never hear the end of it."

\* \* \*

><p>Zeke felt another tentacle crash into his ribcage, but he forced the pain to the back of his mind and sunk his Energy Swords into the former-Brute's chest, pulling them both out to the side and effectively cutting the hideous creature in half.<p>

Even as he did so, another one, almost identical to the one falling to the ground, charged him from the left, and he twisted sideways, raising his right leg and impaling the monster with the

offensive-mount.

When he went to put his foot down, he saw something scurrying on the ground and recognized it instantly.

An Infection Form.

With a great deal of satisfaction, he slammed his boot down on the vile, disgusting little balloon and watched as it popped beneath him.

Another Combat Form charged, leaping into the air so as to come straight down on top of him. Zeke braced himself and pulled out the M6G again, firing onceâ€|twiceâ€|three times before the creature screamed and went limp in the air, its corpse crashing into him anyway and knocking him slightly off-balance.

He expected to be attacked again, but glanced around quickly and smiled.

There were no more.

They were dead.

"Thank you," he said, looking up. Then the universe played another trick on him.

It was standing on the second level of the hangar, looking down at him with that cold, dead glare: a single Combat Form â€" a former-human. In its right hand was a UNSC Rocket Launcher.

Any other day, Ezekiel Veron would have simply picked up the Spartan beneath him and leapt clean out of the way. But this wasn't 'any other day.' He was tired and frantic and his chest burned where he'd been cut since most of the biofoam had gone to Victoria's wound.

He immediately pulled the Sniper Rifle to his chest and fired. He knew that one shot would be all it would take as the bullet travelled the thirty-yards to the Combat Form in a fraction of a second-

But it moved. The shot traveled through its shoulder as it fired the Rocket Launcher right at the two Spartans, and Ezekiel was faced with a choice.

He didn't trust himself to move her in time, so the black-armored Spartan stepped forward, put his arms in front of his face and positioned his chest to take the shot-

BOOM!

The result was the same as it had been at the Birmingham Base: even with his suit's shields recharged, he got airtime and flew backwards, soaring over Victoria and skidding across the ground, his vision blurred and his whole body aching.

"Oh," he moaned, trying to move, but realizing that his body was refusing. He started to black out-

"No!"

The cry was hers. And he could hear the Flood Form screaming as it ran toward her.

He forced himself to stand, but did so too late: the former-human was swinging its tentacles at her as she tried to cover her face, and it beat her armor again and again, leaving wide gashes in the sides as its limbs penetrated the metal.

In a second, Ezekiel was up and running. He tackled the Combat Form, landing solidly on top of it and staring down into the person's dead eyes. He drew his arm back and sent his fist crashing into its chest where he found the Infection Form. Seething with rage, he wrapped his hand around the tiny creature and squeezed tight, ending its disgusting little life.

He stood up, breathing heavily and looking down at the now-dead Combat Form. It had dropped the Rocket Launcher, and most of its body was disfigured, but the remains of a strange black jacket were visible on the front of the same shoulder that Ezekiel had hit with the sniper round. There was writing on it as well, but Zeke had to strain himself to make it out amongst the decaying flesh and blood that covered it.

When he realized what it said, his blood ran as cold as ice.

There were only three letters on the jacket, right at the corner: ONI.

A part of him suddenly wanted nothing more than to explode, to hunt down every single ONI spook in existence and kill every last damned one of them.

But a greater part of him remembered the injured Spartan behind him and the pain that had been inflicted. He made himself turn around and ran to her as quickly as he could, kneeling down to assess the damage as he lifted her up slightly with one arm.

Zeke's breath caught in his chest for the second time when he saw her armor, particularly the parts covering her upper-body.

The Flood's attack had destroyed some of the biofoam and only served to widen the hole that was already present. She was bleeding faster than ever, and he knew for certain that he didn't have any biofoam left.

"Victoria," he said, stunned and unable to accept what he was seeing. "I'm so sorry." He paused. "Vicâ€¦" His voice drifted off.

"I'm not-" She started sadly, her voice detached and her eyes unfocused. The statement obviously wasn't finished, but she quickly started again. "I'm just a shellâ€¦just a shadow."

Zeke felt his countenance breaking down worse than ever. He'd heard similar things from recordings from Cortana, about how she was "just a shadow" after the Flood had probed her mind and stolen whatever they could steal.

It killed him to think that they had done that to Victoria.

"This is my fault," Zeke said, looking down at her, slowly grasping

the concept that all the pain she was in now was one person's mistake. "I've killed you twice." His mouth was wide open as he realized what he'd done even while he was speaking. "I did this." He motioned to the hole in her chest. "And then Iâ€¦" He thought about the rifle and his one shot. "I missed." He paused, staring wide-eyed in disbelief at his own statement.

He never missed.

He never faltered.

Zeke exhaled hard. "I am so sorry."

"It'sâ€¦not your fault." She managed. "You saved me."

He shook his head furiously, his mind already wrapped around one thing: the singular concept that was eating away at his mind. "I've killed you."

"You haveâ€¦toâ€¦to talk toâ€¦Gael." She said, coughing painfully as she tried to get the words out.

"Yeah," Zeke said, nodding. "I will." His breath was coming in short gasps. "God," he said, his eyes wide, "what have I done?"

He sat there, contemplating the pain that he'd caused and feeling the guilt building inside his mind and body, watching her as she slowly drifted into unconsciousness. She said nothing for the last five minutes, only breathed slowly and quietly, getting farther and farther from him and the rest of the living.

And, finally, quietlyâ€¦she died.

He laid her body down carefully, standing up and looking directly ahead of him, trying â€" and failing â€" to slow his breathing and focus. All he could see were her eyes before she died, the pain and the torment that the Flood had causedâ€¦that he had caused.

And that he had failed to stop. He tried to speak, to say anything, but found nothing but stuttering gasps in his throat.

The Spartan's fists clenched at his sides as he turned away from her body, and he felt as if his fingers could dent the armor themselves. The same legs that were normally agile, balanced, and deadly were shaking beneath him, threatening to give way and spill his body onto the floor.

There was a mixture of guilt and rage, sorrow and coldness that had been building up inside him for the past several minutes, but he found himself so unaccustomed to it. Neither his body nor his mind had any idea how to handle something so strong that he couldn't simply bottle it, simply push it to the back of his mind and go on.

He looked up at the ceiling of the hangar, at the pitch-dark barrier between him and the starsâ€¦

And he yelled. The sound originated deep inside as a groan and a growl, echoing and reverberating in his throat before he finally opened his mouth and closed his eyes. He roared as loudly as he

could, for as long as his lungs would hold it, shouting his fury and his mourning and his guilt to the stars and to any being that would listen, worldly or not.

His friends and allies would recognize it for what it was: pain. Anyone else would have been a fool not to listen with fear. For the Flood, however, it was something more. It was a sign, a promiseâ€¦a pledge.

It was his pledge to see this war finished, and to kill every last God-damned one of their detestable kind, even if he had to die to do it.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Oh! Drama, right? Drop me a reivew! I HAVE to know what you all got from these last couple of chapters. And, to those of you who are not fans of Ezekiel: I'm SORRY that this chapter was focused almost exclusively on him. It was a planned chapter from the start of the book, and this is one of the scenes I wrote the entire thing for. You'll have to forgive me.<strong>

\*\*That being said: enjoy your weekends and (because I am sorry, but I promise you that I won't have another pair out in one week) Valentine's Day, when it arrives. Thanks for reading and sticking with me all this time. I've got 5 chapters left in The Last Stand!\*\*

\*\*Adios!\*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

## 58. Chapter 57: The Best Defense

\*\*Author's Notes: FINALLY! I've had this thing done since 3:00 am, Monday...but FanFiction was less than supporting in letting me log in or post. But, at long last, here it is. First, as is the norm, reviews!\*\*

\*\*REVIEWS:\*\*

\*\*Lord of the Trees: Thanks for the input...tried to fix that in the last few chapters. Let me know if it helped. Thanks for the review, and enjoy!\*\*

\*\*Snipess: Hello! Thanks for the compliment on the Paris section. Hopefully everyone thinks so. And I hope you're not the only one who caught the manhole comment...I didn't try to be terribly secretive with it, lol. And yes...sob is right. haha. Thank you for your reviews!\*\*

\*\*Mhop12: Got your friend request and added you...though I haven't gotten to play much Live in the last couple of weeks. School's kept me busy. And trust me, I'll have a few left over by the time the sequel rolls around. ;) Thanks, as always!\*\*

\*\*i-kill-jackals: Well, thank you very much! Glad you enjoyed it. Hopefully you like what's to come, though I doubt I can top the last

one. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*ching965: Hi! Thanks very much for the compliments, but I would hardly consider my "writing prowess," as you called it, worth bowing to, lol. But it did make my day to read, so thank you. :) Also, this might end up being submitted yet...I've got reviewers, friends, and even my girlfriend harping me to do it. I can ignore the first two (just kidding, lol), but that third one...haha! Thanks a lot for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*Eternity of Night: Well, as usual, two things: First, thank you much for reviewing...second: I'm not sure what you just said. lol. What is "UFC?" Or do I want to know?\*\*

\*\*Suliac Griffin: Well, I gotta divide yours into parts, lol. You had a lot, haha.\*\*

\*\*First: Vic. I'm glad you can forgive me for my heinous act of the last chapter, lol, even though you liked her. And, ironically, all the moaning I got really makes me happy, because it means, as you said, that they weren't just names anymore, that people actually got to a point where they knew them and could tell them apart and care about their success or failure. For lack of a better phrase: YES!!!

>Second: Nathan. I understand a lot of what you're saying, and how he sounds more "normal," but I'll kind of get into Nova a little more later, and, in essence, you'll see that, while they are NOT standard, "robotic" Spartans without their problems, they are not nearly as...openly disobedient as Zulu is (save for Daniel...which, only happens in rare instances like you saw last time). But I do understand, and you'll get a little more of a feel for him this time too.<br>Third and Fourth: the ground chapter. I needed something to make it interesting, lol. And it's hard to compare with the Flood in space. But, between Landon and Jason's little show and Daniel and Alex's POVs, I thought I did half-way decent with it. That being said, your comment about the Flood is right. By conventional means - everything short of a nuclear weapon - they are basically unstoppable. You might get lucky and wipe them out by force...but I've never seen it done, lol. Still, the ground battle isn't over yet. Thanks for your review, and enjoy the rest of the story!\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: Hey! Thanks for the compliments. :) Sorry I had to do what I did to get that kind of response though, lol. And I'm glad you liked the "touching" scene, lol. Little out-of-character, huh? hehe. Thanks for reviewing, and enjoy the next pair!\*\*

\*\*killerman83ca: Well, you'll see what happened to Jade here in this chapter, and I can't give you any information on the end of the space half. Sorry. You'll just have to read the last chapters that I have planned. Thanks for your continued reviews, and I hope that you like the end that is to come.\*\*

\*\*Redflame101: First: Jade is wounded. She's not infected though, as the Infection Form was killed. That much I can give you. As for Vic...I am sorry. I know I kind of put everyone through a rollercoaster, wondering how it was gonna end. But, alas, I had it planned from the start. And yes, you will get to know everything that happened at ONI, but MOST of it will be in the sequel. Actually...I wish I could tell you, 'cause you'd laugh. Everyone would. That's all

I'll say. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*hellhound cerberus: Vic CAN be dead, actually. Sorry. I feel terrible saying that, but everything was planned from the very beginning. Thanks for the compliment though, and enjoy the rest!\*\*

\*\*iklldmrogers: lol. Wow, let's address this in parts:

>(1) Thank you!<br>(2) Thank you again!

>(3) Yes she did.<br>(4) Wow...that's a compliment if I've ever heard one. ;)

>(5) The wait is over!<br>Thanks very much for your review!\*\*

\*\*pottervspendragon: Wow, compliments are flooding in from this segment (no pun intended). I don't know about being better than the Halo novels, but I do appreciate the kind words. As for that fight: it was something that I had thought of since before I wrote the Introduction, lol. Planned down to a "T". That being said, Zeke's got resolve alright, and things are about heat up again! I will say no more, but read on! Thanks!\*\*

\*\*fatmannz: Hi! It's always good to hear from new reviewers (which, it's funny how many more you get when you kill someone, huh? LOL, sorry, couldn't help it). I'm glad that you've enjoyed this story, and I also hope that you like the sequel and subsequent book on the way!

>...I'm not sure about the "getting together" part, lol. I don't think I'd do very well writing "romance" of sorts. I'm much better with fight-scenes. Then again...romance usually comes with its fair share of those...<br>I'm gonna stop now before I get in trouble, hahaha. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*The Not-So Addict: lol, wow. I'm still trying to get over that guess. Just BAM! out of nowhere, haha. But still, I always love getting input and ideas as to what people think is gonna happen, so it was a WELCOME addition! And, to answer your question: she died of stabbing trauma (which would have been slowed down by the biofoam, but not stopped), combined with the Rocket-man's little attack (which got rid of the biofoam, made her bleed again, etc). And yeah, the Combat Forms...well, it's Zulu Company! You already know, but if I put them in a place with standard Halo enemies, I end up with 8 Spartans VS like six Brutes and a pack of Grunts...talk about bad luck for the little guys. hehehe. Thanks for your review, and I hope you'll stick around!\*\*

\*\*Gormanuyai: Wow...I got compliments! Ha-HA! lol. Wait...

>I got MORE compliments! HA HA HA!<br>Anyway...sorry, I get distracted when I get compliments from my biggest critic (and, as you say, since you've known me the longest, you have to give to give me crap, hehe). Moving on: I'm playing with Blaine's character a little bit. Gonna see if I can give him a little screen time, since I know what he's like, but I've done a poor job of showing it all the time. That being said: I did tell Robo to chase a dime in the street. ;)  
Too bad I didn't have one...

>Thanks for reviewing, man!<strong>

\*\*vernox: lol! I've gotten that impression from a lot of people on this chapter. And yeah, I understand your focus on the space half. It's hard to challenge the superiority of a Spartan being infected in



space, lol. As for your questions:

>(1) The part about "beating" the Flood out of a body and having the host survive is an idea that I played around with. Essentially, from what I understand, there are two major parts to the Flood's "infection." The first is that they latch onto the host's spinal cord and reroute the neural signals in the brain to match theirs, giving them the "mind control"-type power. The SECOND is where they begin to rewrite the host's genetic material, giving them the decomposing flesh and green body, etc. I took the liberty of having the Gravemind CHOOSE to do one, and not the other. How true this really is...that's up to Bungie. But I couldn't find anything anywhere that would suggest that the Flood COULDN'T do it, only that they HAVEN'T.<br>\*\*\*\*(2) The idea came to me early on in the story's workings. Basically, if she looked like another Combat Form, Zeke would have put a hole in her head (then another in her chest when she didn't die), and that would've been the end of it. It was only because he still saw his teammate and rival that he couldn't do it. Nothing else would have stopped him.  
>Excellent questions, and thank you for your review!<strong>

\*\*Taylor114: First, glad you enjoyed the ground chapter, and especially glad to hear you comment on Daniel and Nova Company. I've tried really hard to incorporate them without them distracting from the rest of the team. It looks like it's worked for the most part. YES!

>And...on the second chapter, lol. You'll like the next space one too, I think, although maybe not as much as 56. It'll be hard for me to ever top that. But, that being said, thank you for all the compliments (including the part about Blaine, which I'm glad someone commented on), and enjoy the next two!<strong>

\*\*spartin-001: Well, thank you! Did you read the whole thing, or just go part of the way through and review on Chapter 1? I'm curious. And I know that there's no "friends" option on FanFic, but I think I know what you mean, and I'd be glad to get another regular reader! Thank you! \*\*

\*\*Samson00: hehehe...your idea, but I'm glad I was able to make SOMETHING up, lol. Butchery section...oh, it's about to be. ;) As for 56...well, you're right. This one was mine. It's the one I wrote Zulu for, and it (along with this whole segment) will be a pivotal time in the lives of Zulu Company. Things only go up from here! Thanks for all the proofing and the...uh...help in word choice, we'll call it. ;)\*\*

\*\*Bubbles: BUBBLES! lol. Sorry...had an urge to yell that for some reason. Anyway...happy you approve of the ground section. :) In regards to Daniel: it's essentially what you were told. He's...very...very protective. But he's not a bad guy. And he's certainly no Zeke. hehehehe.

>The next one...you've told me that you liked it, lol, and that is a ALWAYS a good thing to hear when it's the chapter that defines the story for the author, lol. And I'm not gonna go into the word-choice on your review...particularly where you said that it sounded "corny," hehe. Oh yeah, and I want a copy of that report! hahaha! Thanks for reviewing. I know you're busy, and I'm glad you take the time! Gracias!<strong>

\*\*lucas: lol, yeah...a lot of them die early on. How many Spartans

are left? Well, after the first augmentations...I believe there were 19 Spartans left in Zulu Company. Obviously, that number will decrease later on. Hopefully you'll keep reading? Reviewing too, perhaps? ;) Thanks, regardless, and hope you enjoy it!\*\*

**armoured-blade:** Ah, here we go, lol. Talk about a name I hear OFTEN. hehehe. And, to answer your question: "why Vic?" For that very reason. If I had targeted random members of Nova, I'd get no response. Only the ones people really care about get any kind of emotional reaction, lol. And, as said, details about her time at ONI will come. I never said they'd come in this story though. You'll find many of them in the sequel.

>Now, the ground: In answer to your comment about the Spartans and why they were doing what they were doing, I just have to say that times were extremely pressing. There wasn't time to arm Marines and send them in and HOPE that the job got done. Not only that, but if the Flood have taken the warehouse (which, it's assumed that they have), sending Marines in just gives them more bodies. That's why Zulu was chosen. But I do understand your point. And yeah, the space part does distract me a little. I'm trying though! lol.<strong>

**Oh yeah...Daniel.** hehehe. What can I say? He's a Spartan. More than that, he's a Spartan who specializes in sniping. Oh yeah, he might be lucky too. ;) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**MrHotShotGolfer:** Hey! First: thank you. :) Second, always good to hear from someone new. Third: I'm sorry to put everyone through the pain of last chapter, lol. It's part of process, I guess. The plot has to have some twist, right? If not, then it gets boring. But I can't say much. The story's almost over, as you said! So, with that, thank you very much, and enjoy the rest of the book!\*\*

**WOW!** I had a lot that time (THANK YOU AGAIN!). Now for the chapter that will put me over 600 (I should...hope...lol). Get ready for the ground segment, and never forget: The best defense...is a good offense. ;) \*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 57:<strong>

â€" **The Best Defense** â€" \*\*

**2200 Hours - March 20, 2553**

**Streets of Paris - In Front of the** **Palais de Justice,**  
**France**

"They're still evacuating ONI personnel," Jason said, glancing behind him to look at the Palais de Justice, and headquarters of ONI beyond it, hardly visible in the darkness of night except for the large spotlights that seemed to move almost randomly in the distance. The ONI complex looked even larger from the outside than it had when they'd landed: a giant skyscraper surrounded by a circular courtyard, all of it walled in with thirty-foot titanium barriers. It was a veritable fortress, as far as Jason was concerned.

The Spartans â€" all except Jade, who had been stabilized onboard a Pelican before being taken more than sixty miles away to a hospital

â€" had gotten the message from Stephanie that the entire city was about to be burnt to the ground and immediately sprinted from the warehouse. A Pelican was waiting for them less than half a click to the west, and they took it to the General's specified location.

It was only then that they realized how dire the situation really was.

Before their ten-minute flight to their destination was even completed, they watched fighters soar through the darkness overhead, and the ground below was suddenly ablaze. Giant structures countless decades old were being reduced to ash, and the things that wouldn't burn were carpet-bombed again and again in hopes of destroying the infestation. Suddenly, the entire city, cloaked in darkness, lit up like a wildfire.

That moment, they were plunged back into light, and Jason knew that no force was going to hide in the flickering shadows in the city of Paris. Not tonight.

Unfortunately, when the six Spartans arrived at the Palais de Justice, Jason â€" along with the rest of the Spartans â€" was introduced to a new level of anxiety the likes of which he hadn't fathomed could arrive: literally thousands of people were gathered in and around the old French icon, waiting on their evacuation as the city around them burned to the ground.

"There are so many of themâ€" Angela's voice was distant, unbelieving. It wasn't a far cry from the thoughts of the others, though.

"They'll never make it," Daniel said, shaking his head. "If we have to waste so much time evacuating ONI personnel, there won't be any time to save the civilians." He growled under his breath. "Why the Hell did we just now start evacuating? Whose dumbass call was that?"

"You can be sure that it wasn't mine, Spartan." The General's voice was cold and stern. "I opted for immediate EVAC as soon as we fended off the first of the attacks. Unfortunately, the files and personnel here were deemed too important to give up without a fight."

"I mean no offense, sir," Daniel said carefully, "but whoever made that call has probably just doomed every civilian in this city."

O'Donnell said nothing for several seconds. Then, he answered, "I'm trying to buy time for them. We've been keeping tabs on the Flood's movement. It looks like we've eliminated their forces on the North side of the river. Those on the West and South sides are coming around, and my best guess is that they'll hit your position, where we're keeping the civilians."

"Easy prey," Daniel said.

"That's right." The General said. "We've got heavy artillery coming your way. I hope it's of some use to you." He paused. "The fact is this, Spartans: we need more time. The Flood's attack could come at any minute, and if they hit us now, they're going to get an enormous amount of critical information from those computers and whatever

personnel we can't evacuate."

"Understood, sir," Alex said.

"Good, Spartan," he answered, "but let me make sure. I need you to do this. Whatever the cost, whatever it takes: I need you to hold the line. The entire area to your East and West is guarded. They can only come up through the middle of the street before you. When they do, they're going to hit it with every undead form they can come up with."

"They will not get through, sir." Landon said. "Send us what you have. We'll take care of the rest."

"Godspeed, Spartans."

And the connection was terminated.

Jason turned to the others. "What do you think they're sending us?" he asked.

"God-willing," Stephanie said, "turrets. We could use the-"

"Ohâ€¦yeah!" Landon suddenly shouted, clapping his hands and looking behind the group, over the Palais de Justice.

"What the-" Jason turned to see a set of four Pelicans in the distance, flying over the burning city, straight toward them. And, attached to the bottoms-

"Scorpion Tanks!" Landon shouted. "Now...we'reâ€¦talking!" He let out a loud, borderline-sadistic laugh. "Oh yeahâ€¦it's been too long!"

"Hey, just don't have a seizure on us, Landon." Jason said. "At least not-"

"We got two more coming in from the West." Stephanie interrupted, pointing. Jason turned to look.

Sure enough, another pair of Pelicans was on the way. Each of these had a Warthog attached to the bottom.

"What do you think?" Landon asked. "LAAG or Gauss?"

"LAAG, if they're smart." Alex said. "If notâ€¦I guess the Gauss will have to do."

"Hey!" Landon said happily, "don't bitch! We've got heavy artillery coming in, and I'll be damned if I look the gift-horse in the mouth this time around!"

Jason nodded, looking down the street opposite the Palais de Justice. It had been reduced to a simple, wide open passage with burning buildings on either side that served as the only real sources of light. There were Hornets stationed overhead, watching the side-alleys through the all-enveloping smoke. It didn't matter though: every building had either been reduced to rubble or was burning with napalm. No, the Flood weren't going around.

They were coming straight down the middle. Every last one of them.

\* \* \*

><p>The Pelicans stopped over the Spartans' heads, slowly lowering to roughly fifteen meters above the ground before dropping off their four Scorpion Tanks, as well as almost fifty Marines. Even as the first four lifted off, the other two arrived, leaving behind two M12 Warthogs and another twenty-five Marines.<p>

"Alright," Alex said, turning to the largest group of Marines. "I need four Marines to mount the guns atop the tanks and two who know how to drive to stand next to the Warthogs. If we need to move, for any reason, you're to be inside and driving like your lives depend on it. In the meantime, I want you to move them up and park them in front of the Scorpions. Give them ten yards of breathing room, but other than that, I expect you to be right under the cannon. The rest of you, get Battle Rifles and Shotguns, and get ready. We're in for our own miniature war once the Flood are on the way."

"And, are we sure that they'll come this way, what with all the tanks and all?" one of the Marines asked.

"It's our best guess," Alex said. "They'll be after the civilians. That's the easiest way to bolster their numbers for a major attack on the base."

"And it's what I would do." Daniel said darkly. When several Marines gave him strange looks, he scoffed. "Think about it. What's easier to attack: a fortified government facility full of trained soldiers, or an open structure we're using to hold unarmed civilians?"

"I'd go for the one without Spartans," another Marine said, triggering several approving nods and grunts from the crowd.

"Good call," Daniel snapped harshly.

Another of the Marines stepped forward, saluting. "We have a dozen Heavy Machine Guns ready to be mounted," he said.

"Tell him to bring four of them up to the front with us," Alex said to Daniel. "Use the other eight to fortify the palace. I want two Marines stationed at each one."

"You couldn't just tell him?" he asked skeptically.

"I have other things to attend to." She said.

"Right," Daniel said sarcastically, "of course you do."

Before Alex could say anything back to him, Stephanie walked up and put a hand on her shoulder. "You got a plan?" she asked.

Somehow, the question pleased Alexandra. She knew that the three Spartans from Zulu Company had been more than a little reluctant to accept that they were taking their battle-orders from her, especially Stephanie. The idea that she was now coming to ask her what their orders was a pleasant change, and Alex allowed herself to grin slightly.

"We'll get every piece of heavy weaponry we can, arm ourselves to the teeth, and hold the line about thirty yards down the road. We'll take roughly three-quarters of the Marines with us and leave the rest to try and fortify the palace."

Stephanie nodded slowly. Then, she surprised Alex, "what do you think our chances are?" she asked.

Alex sighed. "Honestly? I think that, if the Flood want in, they're gonna get in. We're just trying to delay the process long enough for EVAC to finish."

"Hey! Boss-lady!" Daniel's voice suddenly echoed inside her helmet.

"What is it, Dan?"

"Got major movement on the part of our undead friends," he said. "Satellite-imagery has them coming from both sides and closing on the end of the road."

"How far?"

"Two clicks and closing," Daniel answered. "It's now or never."

Alex nodded. "Alright!" she shouted, instantly gaining the attention of every individual in the area, Spartan or not. "I want Landon, Jason, Stephanie, and Angela inside the Scorpions. Dan and I will each be outside, and we'll have the turrets on the two 'Hogs. I want everyone who doesn't have a turret armed with a Battle Rifle and watching the front of that road. No one opens fire until I give the order!"

A series of green lights on her HUD ensured that her orders were understood by the Spartans, and the echoing "yes sir" from the crowd was enough to convince her that the Marines understood as well.

Though Alex wasn't quite sure how she felt about being called "sir." It was the accepted term; she understood that perfectly. She was just used to being called more feminine titles by her own team: "boss-lady," for example.

As quickly as they had come, the thoughts were pushed out in favor of what Alex deemed more productive ones. \_How long until their attack? How much ammunition do we have? How long do we wait to open fire? Will they have the line behind us fortified if we have to pull back? Will we even have time to pull back? Are the side-alleys secured? What do the Flood's numbers look like? How much longer until EVAC is--\_

"I got a contact," Daniel said, interrupting her train of thought. He was looking through the scope of his Sniper Rifle, standing in the back of the Warthog. "A single Combat Form," he growled, "corner of the building, right side of the street."

Alex strained to see it, but even with the infrared settings on her visor, she couldn't make out the target at such a distance. \_Oh well\_, she thought. She had Daniel for that.

"Keep me posted," she said, stepping onto the back of the other Warthog. Most people â€" even Spartans â€" had to essentially climb onto the back of a Warthog. But, with her size, it was a baby-step for Alex. She turned and centered the LAAG on the end of the street, roughly twelve-hundred-yards away.

She had only just barely gotten herself adjusted when Daniel's voice echoed in her helmet again. Alex didn't answer though; she was too focused on the end of the street, and she had a feeling of what he was trying to tell her, despite the fact that she couldn't hear a word he was saying.

At the end of the street, in the wicked shadows being cast by every burning structure in the area, she could see them. There had to be hundreds â€" maybe thousands â€" of them. The majority, she guessed, were Combat Forms, but she could roughly make out a few figures that stood taller than the rest, barely distinguishable in the menacing ocean of undead creatures before her.

\_Tanks,\_ she thought bitterly, thinking of the giant, hulking behemoth that had crashed through the boxes back at the warehouse.

"Spartans!" the General's voice was full of apprehension. "We've got a lock on the Flood's position but-

"We see them, General." Alexandra said, not meaning to cut him off, but all-too-aware of how limited their time really was.

"I tried to order another carpet-bombing run, but the ships are all out either refueling or restocking. Napalm is the same. We're on our own for about the next hour."

"Understood, sir," she said. "We'll hold the line. Alexandra out."

She could already see hints of movement at the front, which she assumed were Infection Forms and the spider-like Flood forms that Jason had talked about.

"Everyone: get ready." She said grimly. Behind her, the leading Spartan could hear Marines whispering. She heard scopes locking into place; magazines being snapped into the weapons, and the occasional deep exhale that she knew came from only one thought.

\_This is it.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Landon triple-checked every weapon and tracking system in the Scorpion, glancing in all directions as his HUD linked with the tank's targeting system, giving him a clear image of exactly what was looming in the distance. He took a deep breath, exhaled, and locked his hands around the controls.<p>

"Here we go." He said to himself.

"What's the ammo-count look like?" Alexandra's voice sounded calmly in the Spartan's head.

"Three-dozen shots," Landon said, checking the reading on the tank for a fourth time.

"Thirty-four over here," Stephanie answered.

"Same," Jason said, his voice emotionless. Landon knew exactly what that meant when it came to Jason. Most of the time, he was just as open and outgoing and, as the others had put it, crazy as Landon was. But, when things really got tough, when the situation was as dire as this one was, he was a regular Blaine Everson: cold, stern, and all-business.

"I've only got twenty-six over here." Angela said. "Whoever I borrowed this from had an itchy trigger-finger."

"Damn it," Alex cursed. "Alright," she continued, "I want a stable firing pattern. Spread your shots out and stagger your fire. We need the most bang for our buck here."

"You got it," Landon said, echoing the rest of the team.

"Daniel and I will play mop-up," the leading Spartan added. "We've got plenty of ammo out here, but we won't be able to keep them at bay without help from the tanks, turrets or not."

"Understood," Stephanie said. Landon could hear the anxiety in her voice. Anyone else would have assumed that she was scared for her life, but he knew better.

She was afraid for the civilians, for the thousands of people who, if the Spartans failed to hold the line, would die terribly slow, insanely painful deaths.

"We'll hold it." Landon said coolly, focusing only on the female Spartan.

Her answer was calm, confident. "I know."

Daniel's voice was loud and firm, but equally as calm as he shouted, "incoming contacts! Eleven-hundred-meters and closing!"

"This is it!" Alex shouted. "Everyone: ready! Aim!"

"Ready for this, Jason?" Landon asked lightly.

"Born ready," Jason answered.

"Eight-hundred-meters!" Daniel shouted. Then, only a moment later, he changed, "seven-fifty!"

"Okay!" Alex shouted, "Stephanie first, then Landon, then Angela, then Jason open fire. Remember! Stagger your shots! On my mark!"

Landon swallowed hard, centering his targeting reticule on the very center of the incoming tidal wave of Flood forms.

"Fire!"



As was ordered, Stephanie fired first, and Landon watched the ninety-millimeter shot cut through the air and impact with the front of the Flood formation, right at the center.

\_Formation,\_ he thought, rolling his eyes as he moved his reticule over so as not to hit the exact same place that Stephanie had, \_formation my ass. Flood, tidal wave, delugeâ€|but hardly a damned formation.\_

He picked a spot to the right of Stephanie's point of impact and opened fire, blasting a gaping hole in the front of the incoming horde with an explosion that sent rotting flesh and bone in all directions.

Even as the smoke started to clear, the next tank in line opened fire, and Angela's shot hit the left side of the wave even before the smoke had cleared from Landon's shot.

But it had cleared from Stephanie's, and the results were not at all encouraging.

The Flood were still coming, sprinting toward them, and what had at first been a seemingly-wide hole in their ranks had since filled in, the space occupied completely as if nothing had even happened.

BOOM!

Jason opened fire as well, hitting another spot in the line and blasting another hole. Unfortunately, the smoke had cleared from Landon's attack by now, and he could see that the results were the same: the Flood simply filled in the slot with more bodies, completely oblivious to the idea that they'd probably lost over a hundred Combat Forms by now.

It was as if it didn't even matter, as if they were willing to let thousands of their undead brethren fall, just for one to have a shot at breaking the line.

It was exactly as Landon had heard it would be.

BOOM!

Stephanie fired again, and Landon centered his targeting reticule for a second time and repeated the process. No sooner had he done so, however, that Alex could be heard shouting into the intercom and to everyone around.

"Everyone: aim and fire!"

As the Flood finally came into range, however, there was little need to aim as the two Warthog-mounted LAAG turrets, the four guns atop the Scorpions, and all four Heavy Machine Guns opened fire on the area directly in front of them. Landon watched from inside the tank as the front wave before him was absolutely destroyed by the incoming storm of destruction. Bodies were literally torn to shreds as their decomposing flesh gave way to the lead rounds and even the giant "Tank Forms" were completely decimated by the raw firepower.

When some of them inevitably got within range, as every Spartan had

expected, it was finally the Marines' turn to shine. As dozens of the undead horrors leapt into the air, the normally-light sound of the UNSC Battle Rifle became a full-fledged, deafening roar as more than fifty of them unloaded on the incoming enemies.

Through the Scorpion's systems that were linked to his HUD, Landon watched as a single Combat Form jumped and soared clear out of his view. A mere second later, something crashed onto the tank on the left-hand side.

But it didn't move after that.

"Nice shootin', guys," he said aloud, aiming the ninety-millimeter cannon. It was almost impossible to get a clean shot at this range without worrying about blasting his own kind, but Landon was, for lack of a better phrase, a pro. He was a Spartan. That alone gave him an edge most couldn't fathom. But, beyond that, he was a Spartan who had spent the majority of Spartan-level life inside a vehicle, and it was second nature to him. The Scorpion might as well have been an extension of his own body, just as his MJOLNIR armor had essentially become.

BOOM!

The tungsten round flew above the heads of over a hundred Combat Forms that were too close to the Warthogs and turrets in front of the tanks to fire at. It kept going, not even slowing down until-

BOOM!

It connected with the head of one of the giant, ugly "Tank Forms" that stood just tall enough for Landon to get a clear shot. The blast engulfed the creature and at least a dozen of its brethren, including one fat, round, balloon-like form that actually detonated on the spot, the green-tinged explosion swallowing up about a dozen more of its allies. Landon smiledâ€|then he stopped immediately.

It didn't matter.

They were still coming. The Flood had already â€" in seconds â€" filled the hole in their ranks, and showed no signs of slowing down. Even the Hornets had begun firing into the horde now, and it still appeared to make little â€" if any â€" difference at all.

"Damn it!" he shouted into the intercom. "Come on!" He sighted another place in the line and waited for the rest of the tanks to take their shots.

"Alright!" Alex shouted, her voice barely audible over the blare of the LAAG and the other sixty guns that were blazing in the background. "We can't do this anymore! Fire at will! Everyone, fire right now!"

Landon nodded and opened fire again and again, tearing wide holes and fissures through the Flood's arrangement of undead soldiers, blasting through them and refusing to stop. He knew that the tank had a numeric count of his remaining ammunition, but Landon chose to keep a mental tally anyway.

He couldn't fathom how the people on the ground were feeling. Hell, he couldn't even see what he was shooting at in the all-consuming smoke and disgusting green gas that was now pouring from the Flood's lines, completely covering them from view. The blue-armored Spartan was just thankful that he didn't have a "precision" weapon, by any standards.

"Scorpions!" Alex yelled suddenly, "stop firing! Save your ammo!"

Landon, against his better judgment, did as he was told, staying his hand and waiting on the smoke to clear. He couldn't see anything â€" not one damned thing â€" through the fog, except the fire, the flames that had spread from the structures on either side of the street and were now able to be seen in varying degrees and heights in the middle of the road.

Looking directly ahead of the line, he could see wounded Marines being picked up and moved back behind him, beyond his line of vision. The only conclusion he could draw was that they had been unlucky enough to be hit with some of the stray bullets from the few Flood Combat Forms that were actually wielding weapons.

But, still, he was impressed. They'd made it. Somehow, they'd survived.

\* \* \*

><p>"Is that it?" Angela asked, breaking the terrible silence as her voice resounded inside the helms of each of the other Spartans.<p>

Stephanie watched with almost painful apprehension as the smoke continued to thin. Beyond it, she could barely make out the now-skeletal structures that were serving as the borders to the street and, further down, the end of the road.

There were no Flood.

At least, not that were alive.

"Holy Hell," Landon said, just as awestruck as they all were.

There had to be over a thousand of the undead creatures, their bodies â€" the intact ones, that is â€" piled in the street. Some were face-down, others face-up, others were without a face or a head or even an upper-body. Their limbs â€" legs, tentacles, disfigured arms â€" were scattered as if a tornado had come through and mercilessly tossed them in every direction at random.

"Is it over?" Angela asked again, though her voice was mildly skeptical.

"Not even close," Jason said harshly. "There's no way that's it."

Stephanie nodded from inside the Scorpion, using the tank's systems to look as far to the left and right as she could without moving the giant, ninety-millimeter cannon.

It certainly looked like that was it.

She heard Daniel's voice next, still cold, but more skeptical than anything. "We're missing something." He said. "We have to be."

Suddenly, something moved at the end of the street, in the darkness, but it appeared to be several feet above the ground. Stephanie squinted to make it out even as Daniel took his hands off the LAAG in front of her tank and pulled out his Sniper Rifle.

"What is it?" Alex asked.

"It's a Scorpion." Daniel said, puzzled. "It's the head of a tank."

"Of course," Landon said. "They send the reinforcements after the battle's already over."

"Maybe they didn't." Daniel said. "Maybe they're the reason the Flood aren't attacking us right now."

Stephanie squinted her eyes, confused. Something just wasn't clicking in her mind. Something didn't add up.

The Scorpion pulled out a little further into the road as another one made itself visible from the left side.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Jason said calmly, and Stephanie saw the cannon on his own Scorpion move slightly to the left, to what she guessed was one of the incoming tanks.

"Are they ours or not?" Alex shouted. "I'm not getting a marker. The HUD isn't giving me anything."

"At this range," Daniel said coldly, "the HUD wouldn't be able to mark them yet. We won't know until they're close." He paused. "I've been trying to raise them, but the COM-links are on the fritz again. They're in and out, and I can't tell if they're hearing me or not."

"Great," she said sarcastically. "That's just perfect."

The two tanks began to turn toward them.

"Command," Alex said, apparently not focusing enough to single out her transmission. "Command, this is Alexandra Rilley of Nova Company."

Stephanie wondered if she'd even be able to get through to-

"Spartan, this is General O'Donnell. What is it?"

"Sir, we have two UNSC Main Battle Tanks turning onto the road in front of us but no marker to tell us friend or foe. Requesting clarification."

"We sent out a pair of Scorpions to help secure the West si-

BOOM!

The first of the tanks opened fire, but the distance proved too far, and Stephanie watched the shot go over her head and barely miss her own tank. Before Alex could even give the order, a pair of shots echoed from the line as Landon and Jason both launched their own attacks, blasting the left-side tank to bits.

Before they could fire again, however, the other one fired again, and Stephanie watched the shot connect with the M12 Warthog in front of her, the one Daniel was in the back of. The small vehicle detonated in the street, sending pieces of its frame in all directions as the driver managed to let out a short scream of anguish.

"Daniel!" Alex was off her own Warthog in an instant, completely ignoring the remaining Scorpion as she rushed to the heap of burning, twisted metal that used to be the other LRV. Stephanie heard a trio of shots fired from the line. One was wide right, but two of them connected, and the opposing tank went up in smoke.

"I'mâ€¦fine," the male Spartan's voice echoed in Stephanie's helmet, and she heard him coughing. A second later, she watched him stand up behind the demolished 'Hog, and he coughed again. "God damn Flood," he growled, dusting himself off and looking around. "Where the Hell is my rifle?"

Stephanie saw Alex bend over and grab something from the ground. This piece of metal had also been twisted and-

"Son of a bitch!" Daniel roared, taking his now-useless rifle. "Come on!"

"Hey, at least it was something that wasn't all that useful against the Flood anyway." Landon said, trying to be comforting. "At least it wasn't the Battle Rifle."

"At least it wasn't the Battle Rifle," Daniel said sarcastically, his tone lined with mockery. "At least it wasn't the Battle Rifle? Do you have any idea how long it took me to get this damned thing sighted exactly how I wanted it?"

"About ten seconds," Alex said.

"No," Daniel said, "this isn't a standard rifle. This is mine. This is the one that I sighted myself without the damned AI or the help of the assembly line."

"Okay," Jason said suddenly, "am I the only one who remembers where we are? You know? Flood forms? Scorpions shooting at us? The line? Any of this ringing a bell?"

"Yeah," Alex said, "right. Daniel: quit bitching and get your Battle Rifle out. If anything, the Flood just proved to us that we're not out of the woods yet."

BOOM!

Something echoed, off in the distance. It sounded a lot like a Scorpion being fired, but it was louder, and there was no second

sound to imply an impact.

"What the Hell was that?" Landon asked.

"Better question," Daniel said, pointing to the west, "what **\*\*is\*\*** that?"

Stephanie could barely make it out at the edge of her peripheral vision. Actually, to be fair, she couldn't make it out. Whatever it was, it was hidden behind the demolished structures of Paris. All she could make out was a bright, blue glow, rising higher and higher-

"Wraith!" she shouted suddenly, almost subconsciously. Somehow, a part of her knew, without even seeing the incoming mortar.

"Oh, shit!" Landon said, and started moving the Scorpion. She watched his tank start to move backward-

"Stop!" Alex shouted. "You can't back up; the wounded Marines are being taken care of behind you!"

"Who the Hell approved that?" Landon shouted. "Well, I can't move forward; your Warthog is in the way."

"Incoming mortar!" Daniel shouted. "Angela: brace yourself! You, get the Hell off the top!" Stephanie could only conclude that he was referring to whatever Marine was unlucky enough to be manning the turret.

And, exactly as he'd said, the plasma mortar hit the third tank in the line, detonating in a blue flash that spread far enough to the sides that it appeared for a split second on Stephanie's HUD before dissipating.

"We got two more!" Daniel shouted, pointing again.

And, almost on cue, the two Hornets that had been circling above them disappeared behind the structures that were hiding the Flood-controlled Wraiths.

"They've got at least two Wraiths." Alex said. "Either move the tanks or get out of them, right now!"

"What?" Landon shouted. "Fine! I'm moving it. Get off the Warthog!"

Alex barely had time to comply before Landon's tank " followed by the other three " surged forward, and another pair of mortars crashed to the ground behind them.

\* \* \*

><p>Alex grabbed the first Marine she could find and pointed to the wounded soldiers behind the line. "Get them out of here." He started to say something, but she cut him off. "I don't care. Take them. Move them. Now."<p>

"Where?" he asked, glancing back at them, "there are more than thirty of them."

"Take them to the palace." She said. "We're defending it anyway, and it's close. I can't spare a single soldier. Take who you need. Move them, then all of you get your asses back here."

"Understood," he said. Then he turned and ran to another man nearby, who was tending to one of the injured Marines.

"Daniel," she started. "Get-"

BOOM! BOOM!

"The Hell-"

BOOM!

A multitude of almost a dozen explosions echoed across the razed city from the West, and Alexandra could see blue light emanating from the same area the mortars had come from.

"Sir," a male voice suddenly sounded in her helmet. "Wraiths neutralized, and we're searching for additional targets."

"Thank you," she said. "Take thirty-seconds, then return to the line."

"Understood," the man answered.

"Alex."

The voice was Daniel's this time.

"Yes?"

"The rest of the wounded should be finished moving in two minutes."

"Good," she said, nodding.

\_Now,\_ she thought, \_what next? Get the wounded to the palace. Pull the line back to-\_

Alex was torn from her thoughts by an inhuman scream that sounded incredibly close. When she turned, her blood ran cold.

They were getting up. The Flood forms in the street " hundreds of them " were suddenly standing. Then they were running, screaming, leaping into the air, toward the Scorpions and beyond.

"What the Hell?" Daniel shouted, activating his Energy Sword and impaling the nearest creature.

Alexandra looked around frantically, trying to get any kind of assessment on the situation. From what she could see, there had to be around three-hundred Combat Forms all running and screaming toward the palace. A lot of them stopped at the line ten meters in front of the Scorpions and were attacking the hapless Marines that were still there.

They tried to fight back, but it was hopeless. There were just too

many.

Alex brought a Shotgun to bear and tried to inflict whatever damage she could, but it was useless. The Flood largely ignored the leading Spartan, charging the tanks behind her and the remaining wounded Marines further beyond.

"They were playing dead!" Daniel shouted. "They were freakin' playing dead! God damn it!" He charged into her line of sight, about ten meters in front, trying to stop everything he could from getting to the tanks.

"We can't get a shot!" Jason yelled. "They're too close!" All four Scorpions started to back up, but they weren't nearly fast enough. The Flood were on them in seconds as the Marines around them were overrun.

Alex blasted the upper-body of a former-Marine into nothingness just in time for the undead creature behind it to leap clean over her-

Right onto Landon's tank.

"Landon!" she shouted. "Look out!"

No sooner had she said it that the Combat Form began to pry the hatch from the top of the Scorpion. And before it could even make a dent, two more of the disgusting creatures had leapt onto his tank as well, and all three were pulling at the hatch.

Alex couldn't even see Landon or the top of the tank now. All she could see were the Combat Forms as they ripped into the top of the UNSC vehicle.

Suddenly, Landon's voice echoed over the intercom, loud and extremely angry. "Oh!" he shouted with a laugh that bordered on madness. "You all just want to play, don't you? Well, all you had to do was ask!"

The hatch of the Scorpion suddenly flew off, into the air, and the first of the Combat Forms was jerked inside, disappearing for only a second before-

BANG!

The roar of the Shotgun echoed over the intercom and Landon emerged from the Scorpion, ramming the shield on his left arm into one of the Combat Forms and knocking it over the side while using his right arm to aim and fire the Shotgun into the one to his right.

"That's right!" he roared, calming back down as he leveled the Shotgun. Immediately, the Combat Form that he'd pushed off the tank was coming, leaping back at him-

BANG!

That same Combat Form was nothing but a pair of inhuman legs, falling to the ground.

"Get the Hell off my tank!"



Alex could've smiled at the show, if it weren't for what was going on behind it: dozens of Combat Forms had passed the line, unnoticed, and were heading straight for the palace.

"Landon!" she shouted. "The palace!"

The blue-armored Spartan turned around and, upon seeing what he'd missed, immediately jumped back into his tank. Slowly, the enormous cannon atop the vehicle began to spin around.

Alex wanted to ask the others to do the same, but they appeared to be having a much harder time keeping the Flood from taking over. Stephanie was standing on top of her own Scorpion, beating the living Hell out of whatever undead creatures came her way like they were punching bags, but unlike with Landon, they didn't stop coming. They just sent horror after horror her way.

Jason was still inside his Scorpion, blasting whatever Combat Form was foolish enough to poke its disgusting head over the hole where the hatch used to be.

Angela was taking a similar approach, except she was using a Shotgun.

BOOM!

Landon was at it again, firing into the crowd of Combat Forms that were approaching the palace. The creatures were caught between the eight turrets guarding the civilians and his own ninety-millimeter cannon as he fired onceâ€|twiceâ€|three times-

And he stopped.

"Landon!" Alex shouted as loudly as she could.

"I'm out!" he answered, his voice just as deafening. "I'm out of shots!"

Thankfully, through sheer luck, his attack had done enough damage that the remaining Combat Forms were able to be mopped up by the Marines that formed the rear line.

But it was a close call. Some of undead terrors fell to the ground mere feet from the front of the line.

"We have to pull back!" Alex ordered as more Flood forms ran around her, trying in vain to get to the rear line. They weren't even bothering with the tanks now â€" they only wanted to get to the civilians and the wounded soldiers.

"Spartans!"

The leading Spartan stopped for a moment, hearing the unfamiliar voice. "General?" she asked.

"Yeah," he answered. The man sounded exhausted. "You have to get out of there! We've got more contacts, and they're coming at you from both sides! Pull back to the base! I repeat: pull back to the complex!"

"Sir," she started, "what about the civilians?"

"Bring everyone with you that you can, Spartan." O'Donnell said. "But get in here, right now! That's an order!"

"Sir, yes sir!" she answered. Then she focused on the Spartans, who had more or less recuperated from the attack. "We're being ordered to fall back to the complex! We've got more hostiles coming in, and they're coming from both sides. It's too much for us to handle. Now let's go!"

A series of green lights flickered at the right side of HUD as the Spartans finished whatever Combat Forms were nearby and leapt from their tanks, taking off on a dead sprint for the foreboding structure in the distance.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Alright! One more chapter on the ground! But, first, to the space segment...which, half of you probably went to first and skipped this chapter anyway, lol. I wish you wouldn't! haha. Seriously, I can imagine that reading the ground pieces after the tension in space would be almost pointless, lol.<strong>

\*\*Please review for me, and I'll see you all at the end of 58!\*\*

## 59. Chapter 58: Trial By Fire

\*\*Author's Notes: Well, no major rambling this time. Just have at it!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter 58:<strong>

â€" \*\*Trial By Fireâ€" \*\*

\*\*2000 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\*

\*\*Minor Hangar - Flood-Controlled Assault Carrier\*\*

Ezekiel stood there, looking at the body â€" her body â€" for some time. How long, he wasn't sure. It could've been eternity, but it felt like seconds. Finally, he remembered the promise he'd made and walked over to where she had dropped her helmet. He put on his own helm and removed the neuro-chip from hers.

Part of him wanted to make a comment, something sarcastic that would fit the current situationâ€|but a greater part realized the truth: there was nothing he could say, no words that he knew that could describe what was going on. He was blank.

Actually, that wasn't entirely true. He was blank, except for a strange sensation in the back of his mind, and the smell from earlier, before the Flood had attackedâ€|that smell that was still stinging his nostrils. It was familiar, yet different. Something

about it just made him want to-

"Blood!" he growled, realizing suddenly exactly what it was. At that moment, a dozen questions all poured into his mind, the greatest of which was also the simplest: "How did I ignore it?"

He remembered that Demon had not been inside his head at that moment, when he had first stabbed Victoria and she had started to bleed. His helmet had been off. So howâ€|how did he manage to completely ignore the smell and â€" even when he did notice it â€" push aside any and all instincts associated with it?

"Demon," he said, panting. "Howâ€|the bloodâ€|did you install a failsafe for the instinct-suppressors?"

"No I didn't," the AI answered. "You are completely on your own with your helmet off."

"Then how?"

"My guess?" Demon asked. "My guess is that you were completely focused on the task at hand. You did it once before, right? I mean, the records say that, at the Training Ground, you suppressed the instincts without the help of an AI."

"I did," Zeke said, "but not like this. I didn't even realize that I smelled the blood. There was no work, no effort at all."

"That's because you blocked it subconsciously." The AI paused. "If you focus hard enough, you can suppress the instincts yourself. You were so incredibly focused on her that you suppressed the instincts without even trying to."

Zeke shook his head. It seemed implausible. There was just no way.

"Now, I think you were about to see what Gael had to say?" Demon said lightly, ending the conversation.

"Yeah," Ezekiel said, and he put the neuro-chip into the second slot in his helmet and felt a chill as the second AI was added to his suit.

"Greetings," Demon said in a tone of false happiness, "and what brings you to this dreadful place?"

"Silence," Zeke snapped, suddenly deadly serious. He focused on Gael. "She said that you needed to speak to me. What is it?"

The next voice that he heard was strikingly similar to Victoria's, and it sent a chill down his spine. "The Flood," the AI said, "they have more ships than this one."

He should've flinched, should've drawn a harsh breath, should have clenched his fists-

But he didn't.

"How do you know this?"

"The central intelligence," Gael said, "the 'Gravemind.' Everything we were told was right. It's borderline omniscient. But it's got some flaws too."

Zeke's eyes widened slightly. "What kind of flaws?"

"The same that any being with such knowledge would have," she answered. "It's confident, maybe even a little over-confident. It was more than willing to reveal to me and to her things that a careful planner would never have."

"Where are they?"

"The ships aren't far. They're barely outside the solar system, near Groombridge 34."

"What?"

"It's a nearby system," Demon interjected. "Four-hundredths of a lightyear; it's hardly even worth jumping to."

"How many?" Zeke asked.

"Four ships," the AI answered, "one \_CCS\_-Battlecruiser and three UNSC Cruisers â€" one \_Marathon\_-class and a pair of \_Halcyon\_-class Cruisers."

"You need to tell Samuel this, not me." Zeke said. He looked around and found what he was looking for near one of the automatic doors: a computer panel mounted to the wall.

"Wait." Gael said. "There's something else."

"Yes?" Zeke asked, annoyed.

"Victoria," she said. "She wanted me to tell-"

"Don't care." Ezekiel interrupted. It was a terrible lie, though. The truth was that he cared more about that statement than his own life at that moment, but he knew. He knew that, if he listened to whatever message the AI had been instructed to deliver, it could change his view. He might change his mind.

And he already had a plan. It was vague, but he at least had an idea, and it didn't allow for doubt.

"But-"

"I said that I don't care." He said. "Now drop it."

The black-armored Spartan walked up to the panel and put his hand to the back of his helmet. Then he focused, looking for Samuel's frequency. He focused harder and hoped that the acknowledgement light would come on in the other Spartan's-

"Zeke?"

\_Yes.\_

"Yeah, Samuel," he answered. "Listen, I can't talk. Gael has

something to tell you. It seems this isn't the only Flood-controlled ship."

Sam took a minute to answer, and Zeke could only guess that he was trying to choose his words carefully. "Okay," he said finally. "Zeke," he continued hesitantly, "I'm sorry for--"

"I don't need your sympathy." Zeke said coldly. "She did. I do not." He changed the subject. "I'm putting Gael in through a panel in five seconds. The moment I do, use one of Magnus' neuro-chips to yank her from one in the Control Room." He paused. "The Flood cannot know that she is in your possession. This must be quick."

"Sure," the other Spartan answered.

"Gael," the black-armored Spartan said, "as I told Sam, this is an instantaneous movement. When it comes to you and your movement through a computer system, I don't know how it works, and I don't care. Just get your digital ass to the Control Room in time for him to yank you."

"No problem," she said, sounding genuinely disappointed.

Zeke sighed, pulled the chip from his helmet and slid it into a place on the panel, where all of its blue color vanished.

"Tell me when she has explained to you the situation." He said into the intercom, pulling the chip back out. "Until then, I'm busy."

And he terminated the connection.

Then he walked slowly back to the corpse that was still lying on the ground. He'd closed her eyes so that he didn't have to look at that blank, dead stare, but it didn't matter: he couldn't forget the look before she died.

His fists clenched at his sides again as the cold, emotionless stage gave way to more anger. The entire time he'd been standing there, looking at her, his mind and body had been constantly changing, filled with unbridled rage one second, then a cold, blank void, and then a sorrow he couldn't even describe. And it was unrelenting. No sooner did one stage give way to another than he was plunged head-first into a new emotion.

"Incoming contact," Demon said inside his helmet.

Zeke turned to see a single Combat Form at the other side of the room, stepping inside from a sliding Covenant-style door.

Then he got a surprise.

"The Construct!" a dark, low voice echoed directly inside his head. "Give me the Construct!"

"What the Hell--"

"It's got to be the Gravemind." Demon said. "It's speaking through some kind of telepathy or something."

"From where?" Zeke asked.

"No idea," Demon replied. "The Gravemind could be anywhere, and still use this, or any other form, as a medium to speak to you."

"Give me the Construct." The voice spoke again as the Combat Form began to walk straight toward Ezekiel.

The Spartan moved to meet the Flood form, walking slowly toward it until he passed Victoria's corpse. He wanted to keep walking, but couldn't do it. He stopped, standing right beside her, looking down. He thought of the look in her eyes and the pain that he and the Flood had both caused her. His entire body was tightened, seething in anger until he felt like he would spontaneously detonate-

And it was at that moment that his emotions died away in a fraction of a second. They vanished into thin air as the single realization that had been eating away at his body, mind, and soul was replaced by one desire: to finish it—to blaze a trail of fire through the Flood's ranks and clear the way for his allies to finish the job.

And he knew just how to do it.

He stalked toward the creature slowly, without even drawing his weapon. It just stared at him with those same, dead eyes, unmoving as he grew closer and closer. Quickly, he thought of the Slipspace jump to the Groombridge System, the Flood-controlled ships, how many of them were still on the Assault Carrier, the time that the others would need-

"Give me the Construct!" the voice echoed again, much more hostile this time.

Finally, the Spartan was less than six feet from the decomposing soldier in front of him. "I have a proposition." He said. "I wa-"

It lashed out with the tentacles that had replaced its right arm, swinging them in a wide arc as it let out an inhuman scream. Zeke scowled, ducking low as the blades on his elbows were instantly covered in plasma. He twisted to the left, cutting the tentacles off less than an inch from the shoulder.

And, before the creature could move again, he'd ducked once more and cut it off at the knees, letting it fall flat onto its back, screaming still.

"Now!" Zeke shouted, grabbing the disgusting, undead monster by its human throat and pinning it to the wall. "Listen carefully!"

Then, he got another surprise.

He heard something inside the former-human explode, and it stopped moving altogether, falling face-first onto the ground the second he let go.

Zeke growled into his helmet, seething-

Something hit the ground lightly behind him, and he turned to see one of the spiders writhing on the ground before liquefying, and turning into one of the hulking Tank Forms. Out of instinct, he gripped the

two Energy Swords at his waist.

The same deep, threatening voice suddenly echoed into his mind again, and he could only conclude that it was now coming from the new creature before him. "Now, human," it said calmly, "you have a propositionâ€|for me?"

"Gravemind," he snarled, detesting the word almost as much as the creature before him.

"Yes, Ezekiel Veron, what is it you desire?" Gravemind asked in rhythm. "Speak quickly, for your time shall rapidly expire."

Ezekiel was troubled by this creature's use of his name, and even more so by the rhythmic speech patterns that it used, but he wasted no time.

He didn't have any to waste.

"I want fifteen minutes." He said.

"Explainâ€|" The word was long and drawn-out, all but dripping into Ezekiel's mind from the Gravemind's telepathic link.

Zeke scowled. He was only going to get one chance, and it had to work perfectly. "My AI informs me that your Flood-controlled Spartan managed to nick an artery with her half-assed attack." A bitter laugh escaped his throat. "Normally, it'd be a simple patch job, but I ended up using all of my biofoam trying to save her." He paused, prepping himself for the biggest lie of his life. "Demon says I won't make it."

"Well," the creature said with a dark, foreboding laugh, "you may be at peace and no longer endure. For, like so many before, I contain your cure."

"Funny," Ezekiel said. His voice was laced with sarcasm, but inside he almost couldn't believe that the parasite was buying it. "My point is this: I am Ezekiel Veron. I'm one of the greatest warriors that this world has ever known, and I will not go out this way!" His fists clenched at his sides for effect. "Ezekiel Veron will go down fighting insurmountable odds, fighting an unwinnable war." He paused again. "I'll go out in a blaze of glory, not quietly, off in some dark corner."

"Human, your words come slow and without importance. I ask again: state your appeal, not your self-condolence." The creature's tone had now changed to one of annoyance. Zeke couldn't judge if that was good, or bad.

"I want fifteen minutes of peace and quiet. Keep your miserable Flood forms away from me for that long. You have cameras to know where I am. But keep your uglies the Hell away from me. At the end of that time, I'll meet you in a room of my choosing, and you'll send me everything you've got."

"Your request is strange, for one of your position." A low growl reverberated inside the Spartan's mind. "I wonder, what could merit such a petition?"

"I just need some time." He answered quietly. "And then I need to go out like a warrior, with my pride and my honor and my dignity."

A cold laugh erupted inside Ezekiel's helmet. "I have out-witted great and feeble, fair and brute. Tell me: what have I to gain? For your point is mute."

"You need my AI." Zeke said plainly. "You send me a horde of Combat Forms; give me the warrior's death that I've earned. I'll hand over the AI first, then fight you for as long as I can."

"Needâ€¦I do not **\*\*need\*\*** your Construct, but it is mine. You are a thief, and I will act by my design."

"Well, possession is nine-tenths of the law, and I'm afraid I'm the one holding all the chips." Zeke growled, taking the neuro-chip from his helmet and holding it out for the Tank Form to see. "And you do need him, because without Demon, you can't stop this ship from crashing right into the sun. Now, you and I both know that you have additional warships on the way, but wouldn't those be better-suited hitting some outer-colony? Bolster your numbers a bit?" He shrugged once again, waiting on a response.

When none came, he continued.

"And, sure, you'll lose a few Combat Forms, but you will inevitably defeat me, and then you'll have another Spartan to use for your disgusting cause."

The creature was silent for almost a minute. "Fine," Gravemind said finally, its voice laced with disdain as it dragged the word out for several bitter seconds. "You will have your fifteen minutes."

"Good." Zeke said. "And remember: if I so much as smell one of your ugly, undead minions, the deal's off. I take my AI, my body, and your chances of effectively doing a damned thing, all the way to the depths of Hell."

Before the Flood could respond, the Spartan took his Energy Sword and stabbed it straight through the alien's feeler-stuffed mouth. Then he turned back to Victoria's body. He took the piece of the equipment that he had given her â€" which she had given him first â€" and attached it to his thigh.

He stopped and examined her for only a few seconds before coming to grips with what needed to be done. Grabbing a Firebomb from his armor, he held it in his right hand, dangling it above her, but was unwilling to drop it.

"I'm s-"

Something caught his eye. It was metallicâ€¦part of a chain, sticking up behind her neck. It went around both sides, disappearing under the MJOLNIR armor's gel-layer at the front of her neck. He reached down and unclasped the back, using one thumb to lift the gel-layer, and pulled it out.

It was a small, wooden cross on a silver chain, similar to the kind Samuel had been known to wear. Intricate vines wrapped around it from



the bottom up, and Ezekiel could see that the entire ornament was stained red with blood.

Her blood.

He had to consciously force himself not to clench his hands: one would crush the cross. The other would detonate the Firebomb in his palm.

Zeke turned the cross over in his hand, and caught a glimpse of an inscription on the back. It was barely legible through the blood, but he was able to make it out.

\_Psalm 119:49: Remember your promise to me; it is my only hope.\_

The Spartan's breath caught in his chest, thinking of the words and the meaning behind them—then he thought of the broken promises that he'd made. He'd promised Magnus that he would watch her. He'd promised her that he would save her—

He forced the thoughts out, and pondered the cross itself. He had never even known that she had one. Resisting the urge to yell again, Zeke held it tightly in his left hand, and dropped the Firebomb.

"Forgive me." He said sadly, pleadingly. Still holding the necklace, he immediately turned around and walked away from the burning corpse and ghastly shadows behind him, his only comfort that the Flood would never be able to use her again.

\* \* \*

><p>"So, that's the gist of it," Gael finished, speaking from remote terminal that Breka had disconnected from the rest of the ship. "Four ships, and they're not far off."<p>

"Well, shit." Blaine said lowly.

"Okay," Samuel said. "So now we need two teams. One team hits the generator, as planned. The second one will go to the contingent of ships and take them out."

"That sounds great, boss," Magnus said sarcastically. "One problem: how are any of us going to "take out" four Flood-controlled ships when we're having this much trouble with one?"

"I thought about that." Gael said. "The infested \_CCS\_ should be carrying Covenant standard ordinance, which includes several Anti-Matter Bombs."

"That's good work, Gael," Samuel said, nodding. He pulled the neuro-chip from the terminal and placed it into the back of his helmet, feeling the AI's presence in his mind.

"Alright, so that solves the 'how'—sort of." Blaine said. "Now, that just leaves a few things: how are we going to get to the ships? How do we get to the bombs? How do we move the bombs? How do we—"

"Alright!" Sam shouted, "I get it! It's not a perfect plan! Just give

me a break here, okay? I'm working on it."

"Samuel!"

The voice was Zeke's.

"What is it, Zeke?"

"You've got the news?"

"Yeah," he answered. "We got it."

"Have the Sangheili initiate the Slipspace jump. Whatever the Hell that system was called that the Flood-controlled ships are in, it's four-hundredths of a lightyear away from Earth. Demon says that this ship's Slipspace drives are slightly faulty, putting the travel time at roughly four lightyears per day."

"That means it's only a fifteen minute jump!" Nathan said suddenly.

"That's right." Zeke said. "Make the jump. Your best bet is to take the Prowler that we first arrived here on from the \_Atonement\_."

"It's not a Prowler," Blaine said bitterly, "remember?"

"True," the other Spartan said, "but Demon says that they tried to make it one. It's got a low-class Slipspace drive, stealth-coating, the works."

"Sounds good," Samuel said, considering it. "We're gonna have a tough time getting there in fifteen minutes though, with the Flood infesting this ship."

Zeke's laugh echoed over the intercom. "Leave that to me. It's really not that far, if you can avoid our undead friends. You just get ready to leave. Tell Gael to encrypt the coordinates as best she can. Keep the Gravemind in the dark as long as possible."

"No problem," Gael's voice echoed in his helmet. "I'll have him completely clueless until the moment we exit Slipspace."

Zeke's answer was a simple, "good," and he terminated the connection.

"Okay," Sam said, turning to Breka as he put Gael back into the terminal. "Initiate the jump. Gael will have the coordinates and encryption details for you."

"Of course," the Elite answered.

Samuel turned to the other three Spartans.

"What's the plan, Goliath?" Blaine asked.

Sam took a deep breath, working his plan over again and again in his mind. Everything had to go perfectly, or not at all.

"Magnus and I will go to the other ships." He said. "Blaine: you and

Nathan take care of the generator onboard."

"What?" The white-armored Spartan's voice was skeptical. "Wouldn't it be better to have me helping to move the big, heavy bombs? You know, something about my biomechanical parts never tiring, where as your purely biological muscles do?"

"Normally yes," he said. "But I need a personal guarantee that this ship doesn't reach Earth." He paused. "You are that guarantee."

Blaine was quiet for several seconds. "Fine," he said, "consider it a guarantee. This ship will not reach Earth."

"Demon," the Elite said before Samuel could continue the conversation. "We have entered Slipspace and shall arrive soon."

"Good." Sam answered, then turned to the others. "Magnus: you're with me. Nathan: go with Blaine, follow his orders."

"Yes sir," the Nova Company member said.

"Samuel!"

It was Zeke again.

"You need to keep yelling like that?" he asked.

"Whatever teams you've designated, here's what I've got: you're going to get an encrypted message from Demon soon, and then I'll give you a signal shortly there after. That'll be your best chance to take off."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm going to the Prowler to have Demon fix whatever damage that useless AI, Delilah, did to keep the Covenant from using it. He'll put in a disabler on a timer that will end as you arrive."

"Okay. And then you'll meet Blaine and Nathan at the generator?"

"Not quite," the other Spartan said. "I've got an infestation to deal with."

Again, the connection was cut.

"Dang it, Zeke," Sam growled under his breath.

"Can we find him?" Nathan asked. "I mean, we can still access the security systems, so couldn't we find him?"

"Theoretically yes, but you've never tried to follow Ezekiel when he doesn't want to be found." Sam said. "But, go ahead and try, if you want."

"I already did, Demon," Breka said. "Your ally has already destroyed several security terminals that were monitoring multiple rooms and corridors. And I cannot locate him on any others."

"Told you," Samuel said.

"Okay!" Blaine shouted. "As much as I love everyone's great new focus on our own private pain-in-the-ass, can we please do something productive, rather than sitting on our asses in the middle of the Control Room? I mean, come on! I could have destroyed the damned generator and been back here by now."

"You're just anxious." Magnus said.

"And you're not?" the biomechanical Spartan snapped back instantly. "We let his royal arrogance go out and find Vic, and for what? She's dead, he's on the rampage, and we're still at damned square one."

\* \* \*

><p>"I found him." Breka said suddenly.<p>

"Oh, that's great." Blaine said, putting his hands up in surrender. "That's perfect timing. I'm guessing we're still gonna wait on him, then?"

"For now, we are." Samuel said, moving toward the monitor.

"What's he doing?" Nathan asked.

"Hell if I know," Magnus said. "What are those things in his hands?"

"The picture's shot to Hell," Blaine said, looking at the fuzzy, pixilated footage. "Can't you clean it up, Elite?"

The Sangheili shook his head. "The Parasite is in the system. I was barely able to retrieve what little footage that you are seeing now."

"Did anyone hear me?" Magnus asked. "What are those things in his hands?"

"No clue," Blaine said, trying to figure out what was on the screen. He could make out the black-armored Spartan, walking down a narrow corridor with two metal containers in his hands, each one rectangular and roughly the same size as the storage crates that had been used to hold grenades and ammunition at the old Zulu Training Facility. From what Blaine could tell, they were unmarked, but it was hard to say by the quality of the video.

"Can the Flood see this?" Samuel asked.

"Yes," Breka answered. "And the Parasite can see it clearly."

"So they'll know what he has in his hands?"

"They appear to be unmarked. It would be difficult to say, even for the Parasite, Demon."

The Spartan left the corridor, disappearing from the screen.

"He has disabled all of the nearby chambers." The Elite said. "I

cannot track him now."

"Forget it." Samuel said. "Blaine!"

The white-armored Spartan was shocked to hear his name shouted at random. "Yeah?" he asked.

"You want to go? Fine. Go. You don't have to wait on Zeke's OK if you believe that you have a better course of action."

Blaine's eyes widened, genuinely surprised to hear that Samuel was approving his decision to go against the plan that was already in motion. It was out-of-character, shocking-

Unbelievable.

"You're not serious." Blaine said coldly.

Samuel didn't flinch. "If you have a better idea, go now. That's an order."

Blaine Everson stood there, in dead silence, playing with all the details in his mind, all the things that he knew. The Gravity Hammer that he had used to get him this far now had a battery reading of only 27 which, even with whatever technology ONI had used to make it last this long, meant that he had a maximum of ten swings with it—probably closer to seven.

The white-armored Spartan had four rockets left to work with, which would clear a heavily-guarded room, but not much else. And that was if he made every shot count.

Which, to be fair, he usually did.

He imagined that the Flood had had an absolute minimum of five-hundred Combat Forms to work with. Between about a hundred Elites — minus any that had elected to take another ship home — several hundred Brutes, and whatever personnel that ONI had been foolish enough to send to the Assault Carrier, there couldn't be that many of them.

That five-hundred, of course, accounted for bodies that the Elites would have burned upon realizing that the Flood had arrived, the bodies that had been deemed completely unusable due to combat damage, and the ones that were being used simply as biomass.

With the number that the Spartans had killed since they arrived, that number couldn't be more than one-hundred-and-fifty.

At least, Blaine hoped not.

Lastly, there was Ezekiel to consider. That miserable bastard had specifically asked-

\_No,\_ Blaine thought, \_he didn't ask. The bastard told us to wait.\_

He had specifically told them to wait until he gave a signal to go. None of them, especially Blaine, questioned that the black-armored Spartan had a plan. The question wasn't that at all. Simply put, it

was: what is it? And will it hurt the plan to leave now?

Blaine tried to find every angle, every piece of the puzzle. He thought of the other Spartan's first destination: the Prowler. Then what? What was at the end of fifteen minutes?

\_Think,\_ he told himself, \_what would matter to us? What would make any difference except--

"Son of a bitch," he said suddenly, realizing. "He's calling them to him." That had to be it. It explained everything.

In fifteen minutes, the Flood would come to him. They'd be distracted; their attention would be focused solely on him. That would leave Blaine and the others free to reach their destinations. But that meant that he would almost certainly die.

And he was perfectly aware of it.

Blaine knew that the two of them argued a lot. It was what they did, a kind of "team-trademark." It was no different than the relationships between Landon and Jason or Magnus and Vic. But, the truth was that he knew Ezekiel, and he knew his tendencies. The black-armored Spartan, if it came down to it, would rather die than live with the idea that he had killed one of his own.

But, with those thoughts, Blaine realized that his earlier presumptions were wrong. The theory didn't account for everything. There would undoubtedly be Flood forms outside whatever room he decided to have his great face-off inside. They would see the rest of the Spartans, and the others would immediately forget about Ezekiel and run to stop them. It was a doomed plan unless-

The realization hit him like truck.

"He would have to keep them with him." The Spartan said aloud, but to no one except himself. "He'd have to quarantine them in that room." He shook his head. "Even Demon couldn't lock the doors, so what else could he use to-"

Finally, it clicked.

"Samuel," he said, swallowing hard, "I'm staying here."

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel stepped into the open chamber for the third time, dropping two more metal containers on the floor, near the doorway. This room only had two entrances, and he'd already placed a pair of containers near the other one.<p>

He opened the tops of the cases and walked to the side of the room, taking in the faint scent of the liquid-like substance that was all over the floor and the walls. Even with his shark-level olfactory sensors, it was far from distinct, and he doubted that the Flood would notice.

More than that, he hoped that the Flood wouldn't notice.

"How long?" he asked the AI still inside his helmet.

"Exiting Slipspace in eight minutes," he answered. "I adjusted the rate from the terminal so that the Flood will be in here when we hit real-space."

"Good job, Demon." Zeke said quietly, almost to himself. Then he remembered the next step. "You have the video feed from the last couple of minutes in here?"

"Yeah," the AI answered. "The Flood don't. Your team doesn't. But I do."

"Okay." He paused. "Get the transmission I gave you ready to send out. Encrypt the Hell out of it and make sure that only Gael can open it."

"Sure, Ezekiel," Demon said, "butâ€|are you sure you just wouldn't rather speak to them? I mean, as opposed to sending them a-"

"It's exactly as it needs to be." He answered sternly. Although, the real reason was much simpler: he didn't know how to tell the team what he was doing. He couldn't talk to themâ€|or he might change his mind. "That message is the truth, word for word."

"It doesn't have to be," Demon said hopefully. "Don't forget, you have the-"

"Just get it ready." Zeke answered, cutting him off. "Wait until I give the order, then break every camera feed on the ship except for the one in this room. That'll be how I give them the signal to take off, and how I keep the Flood from seeing exactly where they're headed."

"And the footage you asked about from earlier?"

"What about it?"

"You had me keep it. Why?"

Zeke sighed. "Send it to the others with the next transmission."

"Sure," Demon said. Zeke could almost feel the apprehension in the AI's tone. "Um, Zeke," he said hesitantly.

"What?"

"The thing about me and the Floodâ€|you know, you turning me over? You're not really going to-"

"I'll do whatever I have to do." The Spartan said under his breath. When Demon didn't press the matter, he let out a heavy sigh.

He checked the time on his HUD.

Two more minutes.

\* \* \*

><p>"How much longer?" Samuel asked, checking the time. They should

have exited Slipspace by now.<p>

"We were slowed down somehow," Breka said. "We will exit in less than four minutes. After that-" The Elite stopped instantly.

"What is it, Breka?" Sam asked.

"I am getting an encrypted message from your ally." He said. "But I cannot open it."

"Gael can," Samuel said, putting the AI back into the remote terminal before transferring Ezekiel's message from the Control Room's main system with another chip.

After a few seconds of silence, Gael's voice echoed from the speakers. "Umm," she said, "I think you'd better see this."

"I have linked the terminal to the main screen, Demon." Breka said, pointing to one of several large monitors at the center of the Control Room.

The screen changed from a black shadow to something that Samuel had a hard time placing his feelings on. It was a video, taken from a single terminal's angle, and it showed a fairly small room with walls no more than fifty-feet long, and shaped like a perfect square.

Inside it, a helmless Ezekiel had two small containers in his hands that were cylindrical in shape, and he was pouring some kind of thick, strange liquid onto the floor, and waving his arms around madly, splashing some of it onto the walls as well.

Then, out of nowhere, he dropped the two containers and put his hands to the sides of his head before falling to his knees and yelling at the top of his lungs. He smashed his fists into the metal beneath him and stayed there for some time, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps so painful that, if it had been anyone else, Samuel would have assumed they could be doing one thing: crying.

But, when the Spartan finally stood up, his eyes looked fine. He walked over, picked up the containers, and resumed his actions, walking over to two large boxes near a glowing, Covenant-style door before pouring the rest of the liquid into the open crates and all over the sides.

And, at that moment, the video stopped abruptly.

It was replaced by a black screen, and scrolling white words that Samuel recognized too easily, and with a realization that made his stomach churn.

\_I'll paint it on the walls,\_

\_Cause I'm the one at fault.\_

"Oh, shit," Blaine said. "I know this song."

"Yeah," Samuel said, knowing perfectly well what the ending was. "So do I."



\_I'll never fight again.\_

"What is this?" Magnus asked. "I've never-"

"Just watch." Blaine said coldly.

Finally, the last of the words scrolled up from the bottom of the screen.

\_And this is how it ends.\_

Before he had even finished reading the words, every monitor that was linked to a security feed suddenly died, replaced by static and white noise.

"What the Hell?"

One monitor â€" the one in the center of the room â€" suddenly turned back on. It showed a picture very familiar to the one that they'd just been watching: the small, square room that Ezekiel had brought the crates into, along with the black-armored Spartanâ€|

And what looked to be well over one-hundred Combat Forms crowded into the chamber, surrounding him on all sides.

"Let the games begin." Blaine said, grabbing the Gravity Hammer from his back.

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel could smell the terrible, repulsive scent of the hundred undead creatures that were surrounding him. Almost all of them were Combat Forms, but, to be honest, he'd hoped for exactly that. The Pure Forms, it seemed, would be much harder to deal with.<p>

Although, there was one Pure Form that he could see. It was a Tank Formâ€|

And it was standing less than five feet in front of him, staring him down in the middle of the room.

"Now, Spartan, give the Construct to me. You have had your time," the dark, familiar voice said. "Keep to your end of our deal; and you may die in your prime."

Zeke laughed under his breath.

"Sure." He said.

"What?" Demon's voice came instantly, riddled with doubt. "You can't be serious-"

"Not another word," Zeke snapped, and pulled the neuro-chip from left side of his helmet. He clenched it in his left hand, turning the hand upside down and holding it out to the Tank Form.

\* \* \*

><p>"Are you kidding me?" Nathan asked, dumbfounded. "He's turning

over his AI to the Flood? He's a sellout!"<p>

Samuel watched as the Flood form slowly reached out to take it-

And Ezekiel pulled it back. A second later, he spoke, and his voice echoed into the Control Room.

"No. I told you: stop talking into my head. You have a COM frequency on this ship. I don't care how, but you need to find a way to use that. This whole voice-in-my-head thing is giving me a colossal migraine."

All was silent for what seemed like eternity.

And then Samuel heard it. He heard the voice of that was at the center of the Flood's power: the Gravemind, and its dark, intimidating tone echoed through every speaker in the chamber.

"There," the voice said. "Now give me the Construct!"

"Demon must have rerouted the audio signals somehow," Gael said from inside Samuel's helmet. "Clever work."

Sam nodded, watching as Ezekiel held his hand out again in a fist, palm toward the ground. This time, a former-human came up and walked in front of the Pure Form, putting out its still-human hand.

Zeke's hand clenched almost imperceptibly, and he opened it-

The neuro-chip that had been in his hand had been reduced to dust when he'd clenched his fist, and the now-fine powder fell silently into the Combat Form's hand.

And Samuel watched as Ezekiel subtly, almost invisibly, nodded and turned his head a quarter-of-an-inch toward the security camera.

"That's our cue." The giant, brown-armored soldier growled, pumping his twin Shotguns. "Let's move!"

\* \* \*

><p>"You!" Gravemind's voice was more than hostile now. The almost-omniscient, supposedly "all-knowing" creature was angry, frustrated-<p>

\_He's pissed.\_ Zeke thought with a grin.

And then, against all odds, the Parasite calmed down slightly, even letting out a cold, evil laugh before continuing to speak. "Your plan was never secret, your intent open and clear. Now live out your life in terror, as I strip all you hold dear!"

Ezekiel couldn't suppress the vigorous laugh that erupted from his throat. "You are a fool!" He scoffed loudly. "And now your arrogance will cost you."

There was a massive shift as every Combat Form in the room bent down slightly, taking up a fighting stance that looked remarkably similar

to Zeke's. Out of instinct, the two Energy Swords were drawn and activating in an instant.

"Your blades will quickly die," Gravemind said, "and soon, so too shall you."

Zeke sighed, putting the blades back on his thigh. He gripped the last Firebomb in his possession and held it out in front of him, for the entire room to see. In his other hand, he was clenching Victoria's cross.

"You're hopeless." The Spartan said defiantly. "Even with your vast reserves of stolen knowledge and skill, you still know nothing of what true power is! It's ironic, really. Your efficiency, the unbeatable efficiency that comes from a central intelligence—it's what makes you so formidable. You can block out everything that no other force can: dissension, doubt, self-preservation from your soldiers—"

"Enough, human!" the voice roared. "Now I shall talk, and you shall listen."

"I'm not finished." Zeke said, twirling the grenade in his hand as he slowly, methodically pulled his helmet off with the other, which was still holding the cross. "You see, that same ability to disregard and dispose of everything that doesn't help you—it's about to cost you dearly." He laughed again, letting the sound echo around the room, now free of his helm. "You think that you're so clever?" He shouted. "Who do you think you are, anyway? You think you're so—"

"I?" Gravemind growled, interrupting him. Then it roared into his mind, "I am a monument to all your sins!"

Ezekiel Veron grinned as widely as he ever had, feeling at last that the moment had arrived.

"You are nothing."

And he dropped the grenade.

\* \* \*

><p>"By the gods!" Breka said, staring in disbelief at the monitor in the center of the Control Room as the room pictured in it was suddenly ablaze. The Spartans had forced him to stay behind to deal with any attempts by the Parasite to initiate another jump or change coordinates while they left on their separate tasks.<p>

Now, however, he was simply monitoring the Assault Carrier's progress as it emerged from Slipspace and the Spartan, Ezekiel, squared off with the Flood. Mere seconds before, he'd dropped the grenade in his hand, and the entire chamber was suddenly on fire.

First, it caught the ground beneath him, forming a figure-eight on the floor before lighting up a trail of flammable liquid that was ten feet wide on each side of the room that had a door. No matter which way they wanted to go, there was absolutely no less than ten solid feet of ignited pyrosene between the Parasite's Combat Forms and the exits.

And, more than that, the fuel had ignited the twin cases that waited beside each doorway, making sure to set any creature that might have had a chance at escape ablaze almost instantaneously. There were dozens of burning undead forms in the room by now, all running and screaming toward the doors, but never even coming close to a successful escape before their decomposing flesh gave way and they fell to the floor, engulfed in flames.

The Elite, however, was focused on the center of the room. The Pure Form still stood there, looking directly at the Spartan, but neither speaking nor moving, from what he could see. And the Spartanâ€|Breka was sure that he had the capacity to escapeâ€|

But he didn't. He just stood there, in the center of the inferno, letting the flames lick at his armor and his face, which seemed to have become a solid, unfaltering smirk of unfathomable pride and satisfaction. Even after almost thirty seconds, when the behemoth before him was one of three remaining Flood forms, Ezekiel Veron didn't waver. He just stood there, holding his helmet in one hand and a strange-looking necklace in the other-

The monitor suddenly went black.

\* \* \*

><p>"Come on!" Samuel roared, his voice resounding inside Magnus' helmet. "We don't have much time! Let's go!"<p>

Magnus pushed himself to run faster. Never before had he seen the brown-armored Spartan run as quickly as he was now.

"How much further to the Prowler?" he asked.

"Not far," Samuel answered, rounding a corner up ahead in the narrow hallway that they were moving through. Magnus picked up his pace again, sprinting to-

BANG!

Magnus came around the corner to see a trio of Combat Forms and a single Tank Form lying on the floor. The smaller minions were missing limbs and one had a hole in its chest. The Pure Form was flat on its back, its tentacle-filled maw massively disfigured by a single point-blank Shotgun blast, and its chest caved in.

The giant Spartan could only guess that Samuel had knocked it over and proceeded to step on it as he went by.

And he hadn't even slowed down.

"Hey!" Magnus shouted, finally catching up to him as the two filed through one of the ship's doors. "What's gotten into you?"

"I just watched two of my teammates die." Samuel said bluntly. "And I won't let it be for nothing."

He sprinted forward, through another doorway and into the next corridor. They met no resistance for the next thirty seconds, and emerged safely in the hangar that Zulu Company had arrived in when they first boarded the Assault Carrier.

And, as expected, the Prowler was still attached to the shield that blocked the hangar from space and kept its atmosphere intact. At first, the field was solid, and Magnus wondered how they'd get through-

Then, as if on cue, an eight-foot hole opened in the field. The entrance to the Prowler was revealed behind it.

"Come on," Samuel said coldly, leading the way inside with his Shotgun drawn. Magnus simply raised his arms, ready to blast anything and everything in sight straight to Hell.

They'd only been on the Assault Carrier for less than four hours, and he had already seen enough of the Flood to last him the rest of his life.

And eternity, for that matter, he thought bitterly as the door to the Prowler closed behind him.

\* \* \*

><p>"You sons of bitches have pissed me off for the last damned time!" Blaine shouted, cursing like a sailor as he tore through the few Combat Forms that were giving him and Nathan any form of resistance. He didn't even use the hammer â€" he just ripped them limb from limb, stepped on whatever got in his way, and literally used one to beat the other.<p>

Nathan didn't even really have to do anything. He was following behind the white-armored Spartan, genuinely shocked at the radical change from the calm, collected demeanor he'd had in the Control Room. The Nova Company Spartan could only guess that the change was due to the loss of his teammate, but he really couldn't tell. Blaine was stoic sometimes, angry at othersâ€|but utterly rampant at this one.

And Nathan wasn't going to pretend to anyone that he knew any of the intricacies of Zulu Company, including himself. Hell, the very concept that Ezekiel Veron had gone out alone to wage a one-on-one battle with an infected Spartan, only to watch her die and subsequently-

Nathan shook his head, forcing the memories away. None of that mattered now. All that mattered was getting to the generator, and destroying it.

"We close yet?" He asked.

Blaine's voice was colder than he'd ever heard it. "Not close enough. Stay behind me."

Suddenly, Nathan remembered the conversation from the Phantom on the way up to the \_Ares\_ and the comment about Nova Company's sixth member. Nathan remembered how it had felt when he died, when Tristan had disappeared forever in a second.

Relatively speaking, Nathan wasn't even as close to Tristan as several of the others, especially Jade. Still, the death had all but destroyed him. To watch a teammate, someone who had had his back so

many timesâ€¦to watch them be killed without a hope or a prayer-

"Blaine," he said suddenly. "I'm sorry about Vic." The Spartan in front of him stopped cold. "And I'm sorry about Zeke."

"Their names were Victoria and Ezekiel." Blaine said, his tone dangerously low. "And don't apologize to me for something you had no part of."

"Well," Nathan said, truly unsure of what to say, "I just meant that-"

"I don't give a damn what you mean!" he snapped. "Just drop it! Now! We have a job to do!" The blue-lit door in front of him slid open as he walked through.

Nathan swallowed hard and forced himself to stay quiet. He double-checked the Shotgun and filed in behind Blaine. Oddly, he wasn't insulted or even put-off by Blaine's comments. He was just unsure.

He was unsure of whether or not they'd be able to reach the generator, unsure of Samuel and Magnus and their success, unsure of the fate of the entire human race that they were trying to save.

But there was one thing he was sure of.

He pitied whatever pathetic, futile resistance the Flood had would inevitably try to put together to stop them from reaching their goal, because, whether or not they succeeded, Nathan would have gladly bet his life that Blaine Everson would tear them apart and burn every piece to ash before their time in this Hell was finished.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Okay, couple of things:<strong>

\*\*(1) If you laugh at the Gravemind-lines, I challenge you to do them better. lol. ;) No really...Iambic Heptameter is a colossal pain. I'm a Poly Sci major who had the help of a Mechanical Engineering major...WE ARE NOT POETRY MAJORS! Bah!\*\*

\*\*(2) This is IT! I will be updating this story a MAXIMUM of two more times, because I can't decide if I want to do the Epilogue a week or so after the last chapter or not. If I do, I will probably simply use the end of the Epilogue to answer any questions (THAT I CHOOSE TO, lol) and give you a little lead-up into the sequel, Hell On Earth. That being said, I would appreciate all the reviews I can get. If you've been reading this whole thing and just haven't gotten around to leaving me a review before, leave me one now. Tell me what you thought of this last chapter or two, because they are the reason I wrote the ENTIRE story. I really want to know. Seriously. I wrote 350,000 words for you people. Can I have at least 10? Please?\*\*

\*\*THANK YOU! :)\*\*

\*\*Now, with that out of the way, the updates:\*\*

**\*\*I will do EVERYTHING IN MY HUMANLY POWER TO FINISH THE LAST TWO CHAPTERS THIS WEEKEND. Now, if my Bio teacher(s) decide to screw me and send me an online quiz and reading and a paper for next week, things might change. If my Poly Sci paper doesn't get approved and I have to change topics AGAIN before the deadline, things ALSO might change. If I am allowed to go home and see my girlfriend for ANY REASON...well, I apologize. Unless she forces me to type it, it won't happen.\*\***

**\*\*However...there's not a snowball's chance in Hades that I'll make it back this weekend, so don't worry about that. I'm allowed to dream.\*\***

**\*\*Pending FanFiction's continued support and NOT locking me out of the system for three days, The Last Stand should be finished by Monday, save for the Epilogue.\*\***

**\*\*Now, I've ranted plenty. Review, please, and I will talk to you all later. Enjoy your weekends (once they FINALLY get here...grrrrrrrrr).\*\***

**\*\* - Raptor \*\***

## 60. Chapter 59: The Greater Good

**\*\*Author's Notes: Yeah...sorry. It's late. Remember those things I mentioned? how, if I went home or had a science quiz or extra reading or an assignment or had to redo my paper...things would be delayed? Well, just for fun...I had:  
>(1) Two science quizzes<br>(2) One satanic worksheet  
>(3) More reading than I should EVER have to do in a week<strong>**

**\*\*Oh yeah...and my girlfriend showed up and brought me home as well. Shocking? Yeah, I know. But, I certainly didn't complain.  
:)\*\***

**\*\*That being said, these chapters have been giving me fits (something about them being the finale and me wanting to get them just right, I think), so I have the ground one (this one) ready and rearing to go. I'm still working on the space one. As long as I can get it to come out right, it'll be done by tomorrow.\*\***

**\*\*Now, quickly, REVIEWS!\*\***

**\*\*Samson00: Hola! Thanks for proofing for me, as always. Hopefully you'll be around to proof the last one too...lol. Guess I can't surprise you with anything though, with that being the case...hehe. Still, hope you enjoyed this, and even more so, the next chapter. And I promise: lots and LOTS of hand-to-hand carnage from Sam, Magnus, and Blaine. Thanks man!\*\***

**\*\*killerman83ca: Wow, sorry to disappoint so much with the two Spartans. I promise though...things will pick up again. I can't see myself doing a piece on who they "hated" the most, since, in reality, none of them truly hated any of the others. They were essentially family. Although...if you had to ask who they hated...well, ONI is pretty high on the list right now. ;) Thanks for your reviews, and enjoy the end of the story!\*\***

**\*\*hellhound cerberus:** I can't make any promises about any characters...that's just the rule. Helps my process, lol. But, I will tell you that, as I told killerman, things will pick up. The story's far from over (well...this one's over...but Zulu Company is far from finished, lol). And, in regards to ONI and Vic: everything will be revealed in the sequel, I promise. Most of it fairly early on, I would think. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*outlaw hunter:** Glad you liked it! And there was something blazing about Zeke's scene...but no guns, lol. As for Nova: I have big plans for them, but only to be seen in due time. Thanks very much!\*\*

**\*\*MrHotShotGolfer:** First of all, it was extremely convenient that your first review came right as I was getting ready to post again, lol. Can't beat that. And, for the ground chapter: well, you're about to see the end of the segment. I just hope it lives up to expectations. The space one...well, you're just gonna have to read and see for yourself what I have planned. I promise not to hold everyone in suspense too long. Thanks a lot for reviewing for me! It's good to get input!\*\*

**\*\*Redflame101:** lol, I hope that you can consider Hell On Earth a beast of a sequel. ;) As for Ezekiel...well, that's for everyone to read soon. I had things planned out for quite a while, so no promises. Thanks for your review though, and enjoy the end of the story!\*\*

**\*\*vernox:** Hey, glad that you enjoyed the last chapter (minus the character being consumed by flames and such). Also, you should know: your comment about watching a movie made me laugh 'til I wanted to cry. That's a new one on me. :) Thank you much! And I won't make a chapter about waht was going on in there...but you'll find out a little, I promise you that.  
>And thank you for the many compliments...I can assure you that I'm anything but humble by nature...don't be deceived, lol. But, thank you. I appreciate the kind words. That being said...good luck with all your work, and enjoy the end of the story!<strong>

**\*\*Snipess:** lol, I'm glad you liked the ground one. And, you're right...you weren't the only one saying that I killed off two of your favorites...lol. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*i-kill-jackals:** Hey! You liked that last scene, huh? And...can't tell you my plans for Zeke, however short they may be...But, as you said: there's always Blaine and Landon! Thanks for the review! Enjoy!\*\*

**\*\*armoured-blade:** Hey man, couple of things:  
>(1) Glad you enjoyed 57 and 58 for the most part, lol.<br>(2) You're reading into the cross quite a bit, aren't you? Interesting conclusions you've drawn too...  
>(3) You're catching on! No answers from me, lol. Sorry.<br>(4) Nova Company...I know they don't fit perfectly. I'm trying to work on them...but it's a work in progress for me too. In the meantime, don't let them distract you too much. This is still ZULU COMPANY: The Last Stand, hehehe.  
>Thanks for reviewing, as always! Hope you like the end of the story!<strong>



**\*\*Mhop12:** lol, thank you. Those ten words (more than ten, lol) mean a lot to me! ;) And I would love to let Zeke go stab the Gravemind...but it's not really an option. Sorry...lol. Thanks for your review!\*\*

**\*\*Eternity of Night:** UFC...hmm...thank you for clearing that up. I was puzzled. lol. As for Zeke...he has his own plans. I'm just the writer. lol. Also...the violence thing...calm it down, lol. ;) Thanks for your input, and enjoy the rest of the story!\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** Well, you've read all the way to the very end now, almost. One more chapter and an Epilogue after this one (I'm working on it...lol). And yeah, General O'Donnell is a little different than your standard higher-up. The structure and composure...thank Samson00. He's my proofreader most of the time, lol. As for the space cahpter...I can wait a weekend, lol, and I had no choice. Just didn't have the time. Oh yeah..I like Zeke's scene too. I wrote the whole book for it. I'm just glad it turned out okay. ANYWAY! Enjoy 59, and I'll have 60 out in a flash!  
>...I hope.<br>Thanks for your input, and let me know what you think!\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Hey, well...glad you liked the last ground chapter, but I'm worried that this one won't live up to expectations. Oh well...I hope it does. Still, it's the big ending (to half the action), so enjoy nonetheless! As for the space one...it's on the way! And you'll see for real where the Flood and Zulu are headed, dodo or not. hehehe. lol.\*\*

**\*\*zamilion:** Hi! I don't know how far you've read, but to answer your question: the original Spartan II program did things exactly as Zulu Company's handlers did it. They took children and replaced them with quick-dying flash-clones so that their parents wouldn't miss them. If you would like a citing:  
>Halopedia - Type in "Spartan II" in the search bar (without quotations). It's in the second paragraph under "Origins"<br>OR

>Halo: The Fall of Reach - Page 270<br>Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*ikldmrogers:** Glad you liked the last two chapters! Sorry about the 2 Spartans...plans are what they are. And I can't tell you Gael's message...but you'll find out eventually, promise. And THANK YOU for the comment on Gravemind and his speech! Seriously. I had a LOT of help, but it's still nice to hear. Thank you! lol. Now, that being said: enjoy the last piece of the ground segment!\*\*

**\*\*rebelbullit04:** Hey! Been a long time! Good to see that you're back to reading! Thank you for all the compliments (very generous, lol), and I'm glad that it's been fun for everyone to read. Enjoy 59, and I'll have 60 out in no time. Thanks, and it's good to hear from you again!\*\*

**\*\*Samus 117:** Wow...thanks for that. I'm not sure I would rather read mine over the novels...lol, but it's nice to hear. ;) And yeah...the Linkin Park...what can I say? Sometimes, you hear something, and it fits too well not to use. I've known I was gonna incorporate that for a long time now. Glad to see that it was appreciated. :) Enjoy the next two! Thanks again!\*\*

**\*\*Woodzyl4: lol, thank you much!\*\***

**\*\*Bashbro: And thank you as well! As for the two of them...well, no comment. Two of my favorites too.\*\***

**\*\*the-super-saiyan-jedi-again: lol, good to hear that you like it! And yeah...there's been kind of a steep death toll, hasn't there? Still, I added Spartans too...does that count for anything? hehe. As for what Vic handed Ezekiel: I won't let it be a mystery. You'll know by the end of this book. Promise you that. Thanks for your review!\*\***

**\*\*WOW! Thanks everyone! Now, I have a new goal that I'm shooting for in regards to reviews. Part of me wants to tell you all, but part of me just wants to wait and see what I get "legitimately" so-to-speak. So, I'll wait for now. I really hope to hit it though...as my girlfriend and I kind of have a bet that depends on it. I could be wrong, but I'm guessing she loses. ;)\*\***

**\*\*Enjoy 59, everyone! I'll have the space one done just as fast as I can!\*\***

**\* \* \***

**><p><p>**

**\*\*Chapter 59:\*\***

**â€" \*\*The Greater Good â€"\*\***

**\*\*2300 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\***

**\*\*Office of Naval Intelligence, European Branch - Paris \*\*\*\*, France\*\***

"Let's go! Everyone inside! Now! Now! Right Now!" Alex was shouting at the top of her lungs, trying to usher as many of the civilians as she could into the large, circular courtyard that surrounded the ONI complex. Even in the dead of night, the entire place was lit up like the dawn by a combination of spotlights and motion-triggered illumination. People were screaming, running in all directions, while the Flood grew ever closer and peppered the walls outside with a deadly combination plasma and lead.

"We're closing the doors!" a man yelled from her right. Alexandra turned to see a single ONI operative, dressed in a pitch-dark combat armor, waving his hand at her. "The doors are closing now!"

"We can't!" Stephanie argued, pointing at the doorway. "There are still people out there!"

"No choice!" the man yelled back, shaking his head. No sooner had he said it than two enormous titanium doors began to swing shut.

Even as they closed, people continued to flood inside by the dozen, pushing and shoving their way onto the base before-

The doors suddenly slammed shut, locking the remaining civilians outside with the undead horrors that had appeared seemingly from

nowhere. Alex estimated that there still had to be thousands of men and women outside, all of them sitting ducks for the Parasite.

And they hadn't been closed for more than four seconds when the screaming started: screams and shrieks of pain and torture that no one person could even imagine unless they'd experienced it for themselves.

After fifteen seconds, the screaming stopped.

Everything stopped.

The entire place was dead-silent as every person in the base "soldier or not" stared at the doors in a combination of awe, fear, and sadness at what had been lost. Alex couldn't think. Her eyes were wide, watching|waiting for the strike.

Angela finally broke the terrible silence. "Can they make it over the walls?" She asked. The female Spartan had picked up a Battle Rifle from one of the fallen Marines and was now pointing it at the top of the barrier.

"Gotta be thirty-feet high," Landon said casually. "There's no way they can jump that. And, if I'm wrong and there is|well, I'm going home."

"Well, the spiders certainly can!" Jason said suddenly, turning and firing his Brute Shot at the top of the wall, where one of the ugly Pure Forms had just crawled over. The disgusting little creature took a direct hit and fell off the wall, landing with a dull thud on the ground before liquefying and-

"Shit." Landon growled, leveling the Shotgun as the Tank Form stood up to its full, daunting height. It let out a dangerously low snarl when it saw the Spartans.

"We got more of 'em!" Daniel said, drawing Alex's full attention.

He was right. There were more than a dozen of the spider-looking ones, all crawling right over the wall.

"Get the civilians out of there!" Stephanie shouted, bringing up a Fuel Rod Gun. "They're just sitting ducks, food for the Flood! Get them inside!"

There were hundreds of individuals inside the complex, and every one of them had lost their minds when the first of the Pure Forms had crawled up over the wall. They now ran around the courtyard aimlessly, knocking each other over and shoving soldiers out of their paths as they fought viciously to escape the creatures that were all fighting for a chance at their flesh.

"Uh, guys|" Jason said, drawing the Spartans' attention. "Anyone know what the Hell it's doing?" He was pointing at the Tank Form, which was hunched over more than usual and shaking its head, making a strange, growling noise.

"Shit man," Landon said. "Maybe the damned thing's sick?"

The words had only just left his mouth when they got their answer:

the Tank Form suddenly began to spawn the little, balloon-like Infection Forms from its feeler-stuffed mouth. The tiny creatures fell to the ground, oriented themselves with the area-

And took off for the nearest civilians.

"Son of a bitch!" Dan shouted. "They make those things?"

"Sure looks that way." Stephanie answered, glancing at the Pure Form.

Alex didn't wait for the conversation to continue. "Landon, Jason: kill that Tank Form, and do it now! Angela: get those Infection Forms! The other two of you: you're with me! Let's kill the rest of these spiders before they morph like the-" She glanced up at the wall and stopped cold.

"What the Hell?" Jason was as stunned as she was.

The Flood forms were melting and transforming. But something was different.

They were doing it while attached to the wall.

What resulted were over a dozen creatures of a new variety, latched to the walls with two short, broad legs. The legs gave way to a mouth similar to the Tank Form's and a large, curled extension that stretched upward.

Alex found herself staring. The extension was absolutely covered in long, deadly spikes. Somehow, though, she felt it unlikely that it would be chasing anyone down on its short hind legs.

Landon was the first to respond. "Anyone want to tell me what in God's name that is?" He was watching the undead creature with his Shotgun drawn and ready.

Before an answer could come, the Spartans got another surprise: their new enemy suddenly fired a pair of spikes from its back, impaling the ONI operative from earlier two times in his chest.

"Ah, Hell," Alex said. "I want those things off the walls, and I want them now!"

"You got it, boss-lady!" Daniel answered. In addition, three green lights flashed at the side of her HUD, indicating that the other Spartans had heard her as well.

The leading Spartan turned to a male Marine nearby. "Hey!"

"Yes sir?" he asked, turning away from the civilians that he was ushering into the main base.

Alex rolled her eyes at the word 'sir' just as she had earlier. "We need more weapons out here!" She said. "We're ill-equipped for this shit. Get me Plasma Rifles, Brute Shots, Rocket Launchers, Spartan Lasers, Needlers" she paused. "Understand me?"

"Yes sir!" the Marine shouted, delegating his job to a nearby soldier before taking off for the base himself.

"We don't have the ammunition to deal with these things!" Landon said as he primed a Plasma Grenade and stuck it to one of the wall-mounted Pure Forms. The grenade landed and the creature was engulfed in the shining blue explosion.

"Working on it," Alex said. "We'll have more soon. In the meantime, we've got to kill as many as we can with what we've got!"

It was at that moment that she heard a woman scream behind her, in the distance, and Alex realized that their defense had a major flaw.

The base of the Office of Naval Intelligence was enormous â€" easily the length of a football field â€" and the Spartans were only defending one small portion of the outer rim of the courtyard that enclosed it. She had assumed because of the General's assessment of the outside that the Flood would only attack from the way that they had just come from.

Looking back, Alexandra could now see that she was terribly wrong.

They were everywhere, coming around from the other side of the base. Combat Forms, Pure Forms, and Carrier Forms were moving through the grass at varying speeds, killing everything in their path and releasing the Infection Forms on civilians and soldiers alike. It was a scene from the worst horror movie in history.

BOOM!

The enormous doors that the Spartans had come through shook violently as something exploded on the other side and the metal dented inwards.

Daniel's voice was the first she heard. "What the Hell is going on now?"

\* \* \*

><p>It took Landon only a matter of seconds to piece together what had happened, both inside and out. Inside the courtyard, the situation could be chalked up to a combination of faulty intelligence about the Flood's position, and tried-and-true bad luck that had haunted Zulu Company once or twice in the past.<p>

Outside, however, it was a different story.

BOOM!

The explosions that were now almost constant against the outer walls had enough force behind them that they could be coming from only one thing: Scorpion Tanks. The Flood had taken the UNSC vehicles and were using them to tear a hole clean through the wall of the base.

"That wall's gonna give!" Jason shouted, impaling a Combat Form with his Brute Shot. "We have to get the people inside!"

Landon nodded, looking around. The enormous crowds of people had vanished, replaced by dozens and dozens of Combat Forms and even more

corpses that had yet to be either disposed of or reincarnated. Now, less than a hundred civilians were left outside the base, clawing at the doors and-

Landon stopped cold.

The doors were locked.

ONI had locked them out.

"Bastards!" he shouted, focusing on the other Spartans' frequencies. "They locked them out! They locked everyone out!"

"Sacrificing the many to save the few," Daniel said cynically, but not with an even an ounce of emotion. "From ONI, I'd expect no less."

"We have to help them!" Stephanie said, pulling one Combat Form to her by its wicked appendages before shoving her elbow clean through its chest and dropping it to the ground. "They don't stand a chance out here!"

BOOM! BOOM!

The walls dented further, and Landon wondered just how long they would last before the Flood inevitably ripped through them and came tearing into the base like the tidal wave from Hell.

BOOM!

\_Not long,\_ he guessed.

"Landon!" Stephanie's voice echoed in his helmet. "Company!"

The blue-armored Spartan turned around to see a trio of Combat Forms charging toward him-

"Oh, shit." He said, seeing what they were carrying. Two of them were wielding Shotguns. The third had an Energy Sword. "Where the Hell did they get a damned sword?"

The three undead monsters let out a series of terrible screams as they worked to cover the fifty-yards to their chosen target. Landon only smiled, pulling the Rocket Launcher from his back.

"Wait for it," he said to himself. "Wait for itâ€¦!"

BOOM!

He fired a single blast, right at the feet of the alien in the center. The explosion swallowed the target whole and blew its partners into tiny, decomposing pieces. Landon grinned, bringing the Shotgun back up to his chest as he walked over and quickly took the extra ammo from one of the guns.

BOOM!

The walls shook again, and Landon heard the Flood forms screaming at the other side. He turned around to look at the doors, and almost gasped.

The aliens were smashing at the gigantic doors now, using their tentacle-like limbs to literally bend the metal away from the hole they were attempting to create. They'd already opened a hole almost large enough for a single Flood form to pass through.

"They're almost inside!" Angela shouted, voicing the thoughts of the whole team. "Alex, any ideas?"

Landon felt himself hesitate as he waited for the Nova Company Spartan to give her orders. He didn't know why, but he still had major qualms with taking orders from the large female. It wasn't that he didn't like her—she just wasn't Samuel. And he knew that he couldn't hold that against her.

"Get in front of the doorway!" Alex shouted finally, snapping him from his thoughts. "They'll have to come in with small waves first, so get your guns ready! Landon, Stephanie and I are up front! Jason and Angela are behind us! Dan: you're in the very back! Get that BR ready! You need to hit whatever we miss!"

Immediately, the whole team checked in.

"Got it!"

"Let's go!"

"Damn right!"

"Understood!"

"Sure," Landon said, his voice uncharacteristically calm as he pumped the Shotgun and sprinted into position, less than ten feet away from the hole in the doors. What he saw made him want to gag.

From this position, he could see the undead flesh of dozens of Combat Forms, and he knew that there were hundreds more waiting as well, just outside his field of vision. The Spartan could make out their rotting, half-decayed skin, their putrid, dissolving bones that were sticking out in places that they never should, and he could see every disgusting detail of the creepy, undead feelers that were sticking out of their chests and shoulders.

"Look at them." Daniel said bitterly. "Ugly bastards."

"No kidding," Landon answered. He sighed loudly, readying the Shotgun.

"How long do you think that we—"

BOOM!

The doors dented further, and Angela finished.

"—can hold them off?"

"I just hope it's long enough for them to get inside." Stephanie said, nodding her head backwards, toward the civilians.

It was the tone of her voice that told Landon how dire the situation

was, and how skeptical they all were that they could make any difference. To be fair, he had known all along that they would be hard-pressed to do anything effective against the Flood. They simply lacked the appropriate circumstances.

For starters, their weaponry was effective for dealing with Combat Forms, but they were completely ill-equipped to cope with these Pure Forms that had appeared on the scene.

The Flood had the element of surprise in everything that they attempted, added to the fact that a central intelligence gave them more coordination than any enemy in the history of the Earth.

To make matters worse, there were thousands upon thousands of civilians that were still in the city when they attacked, serving as a regular all-you-can-infect-buffet for the disgusting creatures.

Landon shook the thoughts out of his head. He already knew everything that could go wrong. So did the others.

"Alright!" he shouted, raising the Shotgun high into the air as the doors threatened to completely give way. "I've had enough of these undead assholes!" He put as much vigor and enthusiasm into his voice as he could possibly manage. "Let's kick some ass!"

Jason was first. "Amen to that! Time to send these half-rotted bastards back to the graves they crawled out of!"

"Hell yeah!" Daniel said. "Disgusting bunch of freaks picked the wrong God-damned planet!"

BOOM!

The doors parted even more.

But the team continued.

"Damn right!" Angela shouted.

"Alright, let's do it!" Landon was thrilled to hear that Stephanie's tone had lightened considerably. "We can still win this!"

The blue-armored Spartan saw Alex nod from the corner of his eye as the crack in the door widened farther. "This ends here!" She shouted finally.

Landon grinned despite himself. They all knew the truth. It was only a matter of time before the Flood overwhelmed them, claimed the base for themselves, and inevitably killed everyone still around. The Spartans could only hope to prolong that fate for as long as possible â€" long enough for the personnel and civilians to be evacuated.

Landon saw Alex clench her fist in front of her. "This endsâ€¦right here!"

And the doors suddenly burst open.

\* \* \*



><p>Jason finally understood where the Flood got their name. The second that the door restraints finally gave way, the undead creatures literally poured into the courtyard, the vast majority of them running right by the Spartans in favor of hitting the complex itself. They come in droves, and the gold-armored soldier knew that, while only a few hundred of them were making themselves visible, there had to be thousands of them in all.<p>

The rest were no doubt working to find a way in at another part of the courtyard, bashing the doors wide open, just as they had done here.

The three Spartans at the front did their best to hold the Flood at bay, but it was a lost cause. For every Combat Form that any of them killed, a dozen took its place, dashing beyond them as if they didn't even matter. The few that did stop to fight were immediately destroyed with little effortâ€|

But it was for nothing. When Jason turned to glance behind him, he saw ONI closing the doors to the civilians that were outside the complex. He saw dozens of people â€" men, women, and children â€" all watching with wide eyes, waiting anxiously for the attack that they all knew were coming.

And, in seconds, it had. The Combat Forms tore through the remaining citizens without ever slowing down. What once had looked to be around ninety people had been reduced to less than ten in an instant. And, where their bodies fell, Infection Forms were almost instantly ready to claim their new hosts.

\_This is madness,\_ Jason thought, watching in horror as a man in his fifties was knocked to the ground and beaten to a pulp by a former-human. Even while the attack was taking place, a younger woman was gunned down by a Covenant Plasma Rifle being wielded by what used to be a Brute.

"We have to stop this." He said, cutting a nearby attacker in half with the bayonet of his Brute Shot without even focusing on it. Jason was in auto-pilot by now. All he could think of was the pain that he was watching. And he was powerless to stop it. There was nothing that he â€" or anyone â€" could do.

They were all going to die.

"No," he said, still staring in disbelief, hoping somewhere in his heart that it would all turn out to be nothing but the world's ugliest nightmare. "This can't be-

"Help!"

The cry tore him from his thoughts in a fraction of a second.

"No! Help me!"

Jason turned and found the source of the noise: it was none other than the same small boy that Stephanie had brought with her after their first real run-in with the Flood. He was standing with his back to a large, safety-glass window of the ONI complex. Originally, however, he had come with his mother.

Now, the woman was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, the human corpses around him were shifting and beginning to stand up, being controlled by the Infection Forms as the vile little creatures began to shred and rewrite their genetic codes. Some were already standing, and they instinctively turned toward the boy, growling and screaming in their sickeningly high pitches.

"Hang on!" Jason shouted. He took a deep breath and-

Before he could even begin to run, Stephanie was more than half-way to the kid, smashing everything in her way with nothing but her hands without a single word crossing her lips. To Jason, it was like the story from Los Angeles, all over again.

"Ohâ€¦shitâ€¦" Daniel said as he stared at her, his tone making it plainly obvious that he was in a state of awe. Jason shrugged.

Stephanie had been known on more than one occasion to have that effect on-

CRASH!

A single Combat Form had lunged forward to attack the child, and Stephanie had dashed clean through it, gripping the alien by its deformed shoulders and literally smashing it up against the titanium wall next to the child with her own body. The combined force was enough to cause the corpse to all but detonate on impact.

"She's pissed." Landon said, letting out a low whistle.

Jason was about to answer when he heard something rumbling in the street behind him, just beyond the walls of the courtyard. He turned-

"Tank!" he shouted. "Scorpion!"

The Flood-controlled vehicle opened fire on Stephanie, who just barely moved her body fast enough to dodge the blast and block the child in front of her from harm as the ninety-millimeter shell exploded against the wall and sent both of them skidding across the ground, tearing gaping chunks out of the courtyard.

Jason had to work to keep his jaw from dropping.

Somehow, Stephanie had managed not only to grab the boy and take the brunt of the blast, but to angle her body in such a way that she would be the one doing the bouncing on the pavement, while he was simply held on top of her, frightened, but otherwise alright.

"Stephanie!" Jason shouted, snapping back to reality.

"Get himâ€¦inside!" she yelled back. The boy stood up hesitantly, looking down with wide eyes at the Spartan below him. The poor kid was shaking like a leaf.

"Stephanie!" he shouted again, but no answer came. "Stephanie? Are

you okay? Stephanie!" He was at a dead sprint in an instant, pushing aside what few Combat Forms hadn't vanished to the other side of the complex.

BOOM!

Another shot from the tank hit the wall of the building somewhere above him, near the third story. Jason silently thanked God for the fact that these bastards couldn't aim worth a damn and focused on Alex and the others.

"You mind dealing with that freakin' thing?" he asked bitterly, annoyed at the fact that no one had done so yet.

"I got it!" Landon shouted, and Jason saw him reach for the Rocket Launcher.

BOOM!

\_Did he just-\_

BOOM!

Jason was about to speak when a third explosion â€" this one louder than the first two â€" resounded from the street. As he reached his female teammate, he risked a glance over his shoulder to see the tank going up in smoke, flames billowing from its sides.

He smiled and ducked down to check on Stephanie's wounds.

The response was immediate. "Shit."

The blast had taken her shields out easily and had more than enough power to send her soaring through the air afterwards. The armor covering her back was a darker shade than everything else due to the heat of the explosion, and two pieces of shrapnel had lodged themselves deep into her right leg, just above the knee.

Jason scowled. Biofoam would keep it from killing her, but it wouldn't make it much easier to move. For that, they'd need to remove the shrapnel.

And for that, they needed a minute's peace.

"Steph," he said coolly, "you okay? Hey, Steph, can you hear me?"

"I'mâ€¦fineâ€¦" she said. "Help me up."

He reached down and slowly helped her to her feet, draping one of her arms behind his neck and over his shoulders to help her stand.

"Thanks," a small, timid voice echoed from behind them suddenly. Jason turned to see the boy looking up at them.

"Any time," Stephanie said, and Jason knew that, despite the pain, she was grinning from ear to ear. This was one of those moments that she lived for.

"Guys!" Landon's voice echoed in Jason's helmet as the blue-armored Spartan put a hand on his shoulder. "We gotta get inside." He paused. "The Flood are already in. If we want to stop them from getting to the top, we need to go now."

Jason looked around frantically. Sure enough, the Flood were almost completely gone. There were a few Pure Forms and Carrier Forms lumbering around, and a pair of Combat Forms could be seen as they disappeared around the side of the facility, but that was all. Not even a single intact corpse was left on the ground to serve as a symbol of the battle that had gone on. The Spartans were alone with the little boy that Stephanie had saved.

It was that thought that brought a new realization to Jason's mind.

Everyone else was dead.

Every single civilian besides this boy that had been outside when the doors had been breached was dead and now part of the Flood's forces. What was worse: that likely included the poor kid's mother.

"Alright," Alex said, reaching the three of them with the two other Nova Company Spartans right behind her. "I've got confirmed reports that the Flood have reached the third floor and no higher. There are twenty-nine stories to this skyscraper." She pointed to the top of the dauntingly-tall building. "We hit the tenth floor, prepare a blockade, and go from there."

"What about the boy?" Stephanie asked, limping as she tried to step forward.

Alexandra shook her head. "I don't know." She said. "We can't take him. You know that. He'll die in there."

"He'll die out here." Stephanie said matter-of-factly. "We have to help him."

"I know, I know," Alex said. "I want to help him. I just don't know how. If he comes with us, he'll almost certainly die in there."

"We could send someone up to the higher levels," Stephanie said pleadingly. "We could let someone take him to the groups that are being evacuated."

"We can't spare a soldier." Daniel said. "We don't have enough firepower as it is, and we sure as Hell can't lose any more."

Stephanie shook her head. "We can't leave him out here."

"Daniel," Alex said suddenly. "Drop your Grav-Lift and take the boy. Get him to the top of the complex and-"

"Spartans!" the General's voice instantly put a stop to any conversation.

"Sir," Alex said, "we're outside, sir."

"Evacuation is almost finished." O'Donnell said grimly. "I just boarded the third-to-last Pelican that's coming to the base, but we've still got almost two-hundred people left near the top of the complex. I need you all to make a mad-dash for the roof, so that I can get you out of there."

"What?" Landon said, his voice genuinely disturbed, "you just said that there are still two-hundred people that need evacuation."

"Listen carefully, Spartan," the General growled. "These are the very last Pelicans coming to the base. I want you on one of them. Do you understand me?"

"Sir," Alex said. Her tone made it clear that she was forcing each every word, "yes sir."

"Questions?"

"We're in the courtyard." Alex said, recovering. "How long do we have?"

"The next Pelican will pick up as many civilians as it can carry in two minutes. After that, you've got five to get to the top. One minute later, and the last Pelican has orders to leave with a civilian cargo." He paused. "Sure as Hell not my orders, but orders nonetheless."

"Understood, sir," Alex answered. "We'll be there."

"Godspeed, Spartans." And he cut the connection.

"You heard the General." Alexandra said. "Let's go."

"But -"

"I know, Stephanie!" she snapped. "Trust me, I know." The leading Spartan shook her head, and then slammed her fist into the titanium wall of the complex. "Damn it!"

"Let's just get to the top." Daniel said. "We can make sure that the boy gets on the next bird out of here and make our decision when we get there."

"They've got their orders," Angela said. "They'll make sure we get on."

"Yeah," Daniel said, fingering the blade on his thigh, "I think that, if I make ourâ€|" he searched for the right word, "positionâ€|clear to them, they'll be inclined to reconsider."

"Sounds like a winner to me," Jason said, checking his Brute Shot. "Let's get the Hell outta here."

Daniel stepped forward silently and threw a portable Gravity Lift onto the ground in front of him. The device activated and a blue-white plume of energy appeared over it.

"We've got a balcony on the sixth floor." Landon said. "Dan, you think you can reach that?"

"Please," he scoffed, "I could reach that without the Gravity Lift."

Without another word, he grabbed the boy, got a running start and leapt into the column of energy.

\* \* \*

><p>Daniel touched down lightly on the balcony, setting the boy down beside him easily. He glanced down bitterly.<p>

"Stay behind me." He said. "If you see or hear anything, tell me right away. Okay?"

The boy nodded.

\_Alright,\_ the Spartan thought, \_time to get this over with.\_ He gripped the hilt of his Energy Sword and walked into the complex through the broken glass door that led out onto the balcony.

Whoever had said that the Flood were contained on the third levelâ€|they were wrong. Everything on the floor was destroyed: entire desks were thrown, the lights had been shut down, and broken glass littered the floorâ€|

"Daniel," a voice resounded inside his helmet.

It was Alex.

"What?" he snapped.

"We're coming up through the base of the structure. Go on ahead, drop off the boy, and meet us as we come up. Let me know if you see anything you can't handle."

"Sure," he said simply, cutting the connection. He checked his HUD.

The first Pelican should have arrived by now and departed. Now, the Spartans were just trying to beat their own to the top.

"Where are we going?" the boy asked suddenly.

Daniel scowled. "What's your name, kid?"

"Thomas Wright."

"Ah. Okay. Well, Thomas, I need you to be really quiet and let me think. Can you do that?"

He nodded.

"Good."

Daniel scowled again. It wasn't that he disliked kids. He just wasn't a big fan of being responsible for one in the middle of a base controlled by an undead, intergalactic parasite known for wiping out entire races and species with a single spore.

Something moved on the staircase to his right. It was a standard switchback, the same one that the Spartans had come down when they first arrived.

The Energy Sword activated at his side as he stepped toward the stairs. He heard the faint sound of footsteps, but it was only for a second.

He looked at Thomas. "Stay here."

Daniel rounded the corner slowly ready and waiting for the attack that-

"Ohâ€|Hell no!"

There, on the wall around the corner of the switchback was a single, small device. A single red light was blinking at the corner. Daniel recognized it immediately. He'd seen it several times before, most of the time being held by Angela.

It was C12.

"Thomas, let's go!" Daniel turned around and sprinted, grabbing the child on the way by and running back through the broken glass that he'd come through. He leapt off the side of the balcony-

BOOM!

\* \* \*

><p>The entire building shook violently as a series of almost a dozen explosions resounded from the higher floors. Stephanie rested her hand on the wall, trying to keep her balance on her one good leg as the whole complex threatened to cave in.<p>

"Shit!" Landon shouted. "They planted bombs! Since when do these bastards use bombs?"

"It's C12!" Angela yelled. "Everybody out!"

It was sheer luck that they were only on the second floor, and all five Spartans were able to leave the complex before the foundation of the structure began to give, even though Landon and Jason had to help Stephanie the entire way.

"Keep moving!" Alex yelled, running farther into the courtyard, away from the building.

Stephanie glanced back long enough to see fire and smoke billowing out of the sides of the skyscraper on multiple floors. Finally, the structure had had all it could stand â€" the building that the Spartans had worked so hard to defend came crashing down on itself. Twenty-nine stories collapsed, falling straight down-

"Go!" Alex shouted. "We're not far enough!" In a second, she was on a dead-sprint, leading the rest of the Spartans to the same set of titanium doors that they'd used to try and hold the Flood at bay.

Stephanie found herself at the back of the group, being ushered

forward by her two teammates as the overpressure from the explosions and the collapsing structure surged around them. As they finally reached still-open doors, she felt herself being thrown forward, either by Landon and Jason or by the surge, she didn't know.

After several moments on the ground, dazed and in pain, Stephanie forced herself to stand on shaky legs.

"Daniel!" Alex was shouting. "Daniel! Damn it, Dan, answer me! Daniel!"

Stephanie glanced back and forth as Landon stood up and helped to stabilize her. She couldn't see any sign of Daniel or the boy. Behind her, ONI's precious complex had been reduced to a burning mountain of rubble. It had fallen at an angle and crashed through one wall of the courtyard, out into the street.

"All those people," Stephanie mumbled in disbelief. "They were so close."

"Can't worry about that now," Jason said. "We have to-"

The sound of an engine overhead stopped him, and Stephanie looked up to see a Pelican "the last Pelican" hovering near the spot where the top of the complex should have been. In the flame and smoke, there was no way it would ever see them.

"He's gonna leave." Angela said. "There's no way he can even know we're down here." After a pause, she turned to the leading Spartan. "Alex-"

"Dan!" Alex was shouting into the intercom and not focusing on anyone, allowing everyone on the channel to hear her. Finally, she took a few sharp breaths and sat down on the ground, putting her hands on her head. "Damn it!" She threw her fist into the ground.

"Aw, what's wrong? Miss me?"

The voice was male.

"Daniel!" she stood up and looked around, and Stephanie saw the other Spartan emerge from one of the alleyways outside the facility, carrying the boy.

"I tried to tell you guys about the C12," he said, "but the COMs were down again for a few minutes."

Alex covered the distance to the male Spartan in a second. For some reason, Stephanie got the impression that she was going to hug him or-

SMACK!

Her open palm crashed into the back of his helmet, and Daniel cursed under his breath.

"If you ever let me wonder if you're dead again, I will kill you! Do you understand me, you stupid idiot?" The words were harsh, but Stephanie could tell that Alex was inches from laughter.



"Yeah," Dan said, rubbing his head, "sure. Got it, boss-lady."

"So, as great as this reunion is," Landon said, "we still have to get out of here, and our only ride is hovering way the Hell up there." He pointed to the Pelican, which was shining a pair of spotlights on the ground around the complex.

But Stephanie knew that it didn't matter. The pilot could shine the lights right on Zulu and Nova Company, and he would never know it.

"This is **\*\*Spartan 030\*\*** of Nova Company." Alex said calmly into the intercom. "Request immediate extraction. We are outside the remains of the complex, on the South side. Requesting extraction." After ten seconds of silence, she shouted, "hey! Somebody, answer me!"

A crackle of static, and then, "Spartan, this is Echo 34. You said South side?"

"Yeah," Alex said. "We're just outside the courtyard."

"Copy that," the man said, "I've been given orders not to land this close to the complex. Meet me a half-a-click farther South. Got an old parking garage."

"Meet you at the top." Alex said.

"Echo out."

"Let's go!" Landon yelled. "I'm sick of this place."

"My thoughts exactly," Daniel growled, putting the boy down, who immediately ran toward Stephanie.

"Hey," she said kindly. "Time to leave."

"Less babysitting," Landon said, "more running. Pick him up if you want to, but it's time we got the Hell out of here."

"We've said a half-a-dozen times now." Jason said stoically. "And we've yet to even leave the damned complex."

"That's not true." Landon answered. "We're outside the courtyard now, aren't we?" He shrugged.

"He's got a po-" Stephanie was stopped mid-sentence by the sound of another engine.

\_No,\_ she thought, correcting herself, \_several engines.\_ She looked to the South, where they were coming from, and felt her blood run cold.

"Are those-?"

"\_Longsword\_ Interceptors," Landon said darkly, watching as the three crafts passed above their heads and went deeper into the city.

"Why would they send in \_Longswords\_?" Angela asked. "I thought the bombing runs were over."

"All but one," Landon answered. His voice was oddly distant. Then, he quickly returned. "We have to get out of here. And I mean right now."

"Why?"

"I've got one word for you: HAVOK."

\* \* \*

><p>"HAVOK?" Stephanie shouted from beside Landon. He and Angela were helping her to move toward their new extraction point. The biofoam had patched her leg up nicely, and she could ignore the pain, but in spite of that, she still couldn't run on it or even walk with any semblance of efficiency.<p>

"A HAVOK-class nuclear warhead," Angela said from her other side. "Packs a thirty-megaton yield, will blast entire cities to ash."

"They're cleaning house." Landon said quietly, shaking his head. "And I'll bet my bottom dollar that they don't give a rat's ass if we're still here."

"You got that right," Alex said from the front. "How much time do you think we have until they drop those things?"

"Hell if I know." Landon answered. "I wouldn't even send them out until I had a drop-point established, so I don't know what the Hell they're up to." He rolled his eyes. "Idiots."

When he looked forward again, however, his mood brightened. He could see the roof of the parking garage " still intact " in the distance. For the most part, the buildings around it were undamaged as well.

"Finally!" Daniel said, slowing down as he shifted the position of the nine-year-old boy on his shoulder. "Hey, anyone wanna tell me how I got stuck with the kid?"

"It's because you're so good with them." Angela said sarcastically.

"No it wasn't," Alex said. "I gave him to you because you have so much in common. I mean, you're both immature and scared-"

"Shut it." Dan snapped as the Spartans entered into the maze of structures. "I'm not scared of these useless, undead pains-in-my-ass. The only thing I'm scared of is that there won't be any food wherever we get dropped off."

BOOM!

No sooner had the words left his mouth than an explosion " the loudest that Landon had ever heard " went off in the city behind them. It had originated in the northernmost parts of Paris, but that didn't matter: Landon could still feel the pressure of the blast as it knocked him and the rest of the Spartans clean off their feet and every window nearby shattered as the buildings themselves shook like

they were in an earthquake.

"They dropped the first HAVOK!"

"No shit, Sherlock!" Landon growled, standing up. "And that means the rest are on the way, so let's g-"

He stopped suddenly, looking dead-ahead with wide eyes.

"You have to be kidding me."

Two Scorpion Main Battle Tanks emerged from the sides of the street and slowly took aim at the Spartans.

"I've still got the Fuel Rod Gun." Stephanie said.

"Forget it," Landon growled. "It's too slow."

The first of the Scorpions began to lower its gun.

"Scatter!" Jason shouted. "We'll meet up with you at the garage!"

Instantly, the Spartans went in four different directions: Alex, Daniel, and Angela all went separate ways, with Daniel carrying the boy. Jason and Landon stuck with Stephanie.

"You two move!" she shouted. "I'll be fine."

"Yeah, okay," Landon said sarcastically. "Please! You can barely walk. Now come on, let's move!"

They took all of two steps before the first of the tanks opened fire, and the ninety-millimeter shell passed less than three feet above his head, detonating thirty-yards behind him and the other Spartans.

"Take her!" Jason shouted, letting go and leaving Landon to hold his ally up.

"Where the Hell are-"

BOOM!

The second tank pointed the head of its cannon right at Landon and fired. Before he could move, or even consider getting Stephanie out of the way, Jason had put himself directly between them and the tank, holding both his shields at his chest. The round exploded and he flew backwards, directly into Landon and knocking him over.

"Damn it, you can't imagine how much I want out of here!" Landon shouted, pulling himself up and grabbing Stephanie again as Jason worked to stand up. He turned to the gold-armored Spartan. "Good block, man."

"Yeah," he moaned, pushing himself up. "No problem. Oh, Hell, that stings. Damn it."

"Okay," Landon managed, "that Fuel Rod sounds great right now. Do me a favor and give it here."

Stephanie detached the gun from her back and handed it to Landon, using one hand to stabilize herself on her good leg.

"I'll be back." Landon said, taking off to the right, down an alley between two buildings. In seconds, he'd reached the end, rounded the corner, and was looking at the nearest of the tanks. He leveled the Fuel Rod Gun and fired all five rounds in the magazine directly at the side of the Scorpion. One, two, three of them exploded before the tank went up in smoke.

The last two were extra, but Landon found the explosions very satisfying regardless. He reloaded the Fuel Rod Gun and blasted the remaining tank in a similar fashion.

"Wow," he said, slightly puzzled, "that was really easy." He focused on Stephanie and Jason. "That's it. Let's go."

"You've got my vote." Stephanie said.

Landon checked the road farther on, looking for signs of the Flood. If there were hostile-controlled tanks, odds were that the Flood were far from finished. Still, the lights from the parking garage were less than a quarter of a mile away.

"I'll go on ahead." Landon said, drawing the Shotgun. Two green acknowledgment lights flickered in his HUD and he sprinted forward, checking the alleys as he went.

There were no signs of the Flood.

He didn't relax, not for a second. He to keep looking, but he couldn't wait either. "Clear!" he shouted into the intercom. "Come on!"

Jason helped Stephanie up to the parking garage with Landon leading the way up, first to the second floor, and then to the third before they encountered anything. It wasn't until they reached the ramp that led up to the fourth floor that they were forced to stop.

"Where are Alex, Dan, and Angela?" Stephanie asked, putting her hand on the wall to help her stay standing when Jason let go. "They should be here."

"No clue." The gold-armored Spartan said. "But we need to keep moving. Those warheads could hit the ground any second."

"The Pelican's just two stories above us." Landon said. "We can be there in under a minute if we go now."

"We have to wait for Nova." Stephanie said. Landon started to speak, but she cut him off. "They're our teammates now. If Sam were here, you know we wouldn't be going anywhere." She paused. "And besides: Daniel still has that little boy."

"You and your soft spots," Landon muttered, rolling his eyes. "Fine. We'll wait here. Two minutes, and not a second more."

"Sure."

"Works for me."

"Good."

And they waited.

\* \* \*

><p>"This is stupid!" Daniel shouted, running to keep up with Angela and Alex. "We should be getting to the extraction point, not playing humanitarians!"<p>

"There are almost a dozen people in there." Alex said, pointing to the small store on the corner. It was a simple market, and old too. Large windows lined the front of the building and inside, eight adults were hiding in the aisles.

Alex walked up and pushed the door to the store open.

"Just leave us alone!" one of men shouted, standing up. He was older, at least forty.

"We're not here to harm anyone." Angela said. "We're part of the UNSC. We're Spartans."

At this, the man seemed shocked. So did everyone else in the store, as each and every one of them slowly stood up.

"You'reâ€¦Spartans?"

"That's right." Daniel said. "And we're leaving. Command has approved the use of tactical nukes to clear this town. You have two choices: come with us, or die in this shop."

Alex stared at him in shock. \_Did he just introduce himself with a life-and-death decision?\_ She thought.

"Your call," he said. "What's it gonna be?"

No one said a word, only took deep breaths and ran up to the group of super-soldiers.

"Good." Dan said, turning to Alex.

"What?" she asked. "If you're looking for praise, search somewhere else. That was hardly the best way to go about it."

Daniel shrugged. "Seemed to work fine."

"Alright everyone," Alex said, ignoring him. "We don't have much time, so if you don't think you can keep up, tell us now and we will carry you." She paused. "And no, I'm not joking. If you're slow, tell me now. We don't have time to wait."

No one said anything.

"Good. Now move out."

\* \* \*

><p>"Two minutes is up." Landon said. "Let's go."<p>

Stephanie sighed loudly. She didn't want to, but Landon was right. Their time was up, and they couldn't wait any longer. God only knew how long it would be before the next bomb was dropped.

The three Spartans stood and walked up, onto the fourth level, doing a quick sweep of the area before immediately taking the stairs up onto the roof, where the Pelican was waiting, thrusters active and facing away from them.

They went around to the front, checking for hostiles, and the pilot saw them immediately. "Thank God," he said over the intercom. "It's about time. What took you guys so--"

The pilot was suddenly hit from behind with a long tentacle and yanked back, out of the cockpit and into the rear bay of the dropship.

"How the Hell did we not see that?" Jason yelled, letting go of Stephanie and raising his Brute Shot. "For the love of God, I am readyâ€¦to go home!" He ran around to the open back of the Pelican and Stephanie heard half-a-dozen blasts from the Covenant explosive weapon. Then, "clear!"

Landon helped her to the back and she stepped into the Pelican and sat down on one of the ten available seats. Jason sat down beside her, and Landon stepped over the now-deceased pilot, walking into the cockpit.

"I'll have us out of here in no time."

Stephanie sighed, looking out the open back of the Pelican at the city behind them. The moon provided a little bit of light for her to see, but it was the flames that gave her a real view. Even at this hour, at almost midnight, the burning rubble was still bright enough to see all of Paris.

Or, at least, what was left of it.

More than a third of the place had been leveled by the first HAVOK nuclear warhead. Stephanie was sure that the rest of it would soon follow, and she'd kept a constant eye out for additional UNSC bombers.

So far, she had seen none.

Suddenly, the Pelican began to lift off.

"You're not really going to leave them," she said into the intercom, focusing on Landon.

"Hell no," he said. "I'm going to go down and look for them. Hang on!"

The Pelican spun around and flew from the top of the garage, back the way the Spartans had come. It moved painfully slowly, and Stephanie could make out shapes in the darkness below--

But they weren't human. There were too many, and they moved too

quickly.

\_Flood,\_ she thought with disgust.

"Nova Company," Landon said into the intercom on the Pelican, his voice echoing on all nearby receivers. "Nova Company, come in. Come on, damn it! The train is leaving the station!"

"Landon?"

It was Alex.

"Hey!" he shouted back. "There you are! Where are you guys?"

"You just passed us. Turn one-eighty, and then look to the East on your way back. You damn near flew right over us."

"Turning," Landon said, and Stephanie felt the craft spin again. It surged forward and lowered until it was only a few meters from the ground, landing in the middle of a wide street.

"We see you," Alex said.

"Found you too," Stephanie said, spotting the three Spartans and almost a dozen civilians behind them as they sprinted for the Pelican. "Hey! You found fr-"

She stopped.

"Oh Hell," Jason said.

"What is it?" Landon asked. When no answer came, he continued, "hey, what are you guys talking about?"

Stephanie suddenly found herself shouting. "Run!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "Run!" Jason was already beside her, taking aim with the Covenant Carbine.

Daniel was the first of the group to risk it: with the boy that she had saved still on his shoulder, he glanced backwards and must have seen immediately what Stephanie did: an all-out horde of Flood Combat Forms that were pouring out of every alley and structure, chasing them down.

"Go-go-go!" he yelled frantically.

It was hopeless.

Jason fired into the incoming wave behind them, but it didn't matter. The group was still fifty-yards from the Pelican when the first of the civilians were caught by the Flood. Less than three seconds after the first one fell, the only civilian left alive was the one Daniel was carrying.

"Landon, get ready to take off!" Alex snapped into the intercom. Something flashed above her and Stephanie glanced upwards, only to see a custom-mounted view screen that showed the inside of the cockpit.

"Say the word!" the blue-armored Spartan shouted back.

Stephanie held her breath and pulled the two Maulers to bear as Daniel reached the back of the Pelican first. Alex was right behind him, but waited at the edge until Angela was safely inside before jumping in herself.

"Go!" she yelled, her voice booming into Stephanie's ears.

"Gone!" Landon answered, and Stephanie watched him flick several switches and tinker with the controls for only a second before the Pelican suddenly rushed forward and began to lift off.

As if in response, the Flood seemed to speed up, running faster than ever and leaping headlong toward the craft. One actually managed to leap into the cargo area-

BANG!

Twin blasts from the Maulers and a swift kick from Daniel sent the disgusting creature right back to the ground below.

"Alright," Landon said, sounding exasperated, "I would like to remind everyone to keep their hands and feet inside the ride at all times and, please, do wear your safety-belts. I hope you've enjoyed your stay at The Threshold of Hell, and please join us again next year."

Stephanie sighed, looking out the back as she latched herself to the seat and Daniel sat the boy down next to her.

"His name is Thomas." Dan said quietly.

Stephanie nodded, turning to the boy. "Hi," she said with as much enthusiasm as she could manage.

He waved slightly, but didn't smile.

BOOM!

Everyone in the Pelican turned to watch as not two, but three more HAVOK-class warheads were dropped. They encased the entire city in domes of nuclear destruction, spreading outward and decimating everything in their path. The one nearest the Spartans was close enough that the overpressure surged around the Pelican, almost causing it to spiral out of control.

If Landon hadn't been the pilot, Stephanie would've been completely certain that they would crash.

But they didn't. He stabilized the craft, and she was left staring out the back, watching the entire city that they had tried to save go up in flames. She couldn't imagine how many people had died in there, how many had never even had a chance—how many had-

"Spartans?"

It was the General once again.

"Yes sir?" Alex answered.



"Glad to see you made it out." He answered. "Job well done."

"With all due respect, sir," Stephanie said, "we failed miserably. Or did you miss the show?" Even she couldn't understand how such anger and blatant bitterness had managed to invade her voice toward a superior.

"No Spartan," he answered, apparently unfazed, "I didn't miss it. You did all you could do. Everyone knows that."

"We have a child here." Alexandra interjected. "His name is Thomas Wright. His mother might have been one of the ones evacuated."

"Let me check." O'Donnell answered, and the connection was terminated.

Nothing was said for almost a full minute, until the General's voice came again, echoing inside the Spartans' helms.

"Good news, Spartans," he said. "Mrs. Wright would like to talk to her son."

In spite of the situation, Stephanie found herself smiling wide. She pulled the radio from the side of the Pelican and handed it to the boy. "Someone wants to talk to you." She said.

"Hello?"

Two seconds passed, and then-

"Mom!"

Stephanie smiled wider, watching the boy's face well up as the conversation continued. The words that were said didn't matter, not to him or to his mother or to anyone else. It was just the fact that, through it all, someone had survived; that, at the end of the day, neither of them was alone.

And suddenly, more than her happiness for Thomas Wright, more than her pain at the thought of all who had been lost— even more than her desire to see it all changed, Stephanie wanted to see the rest of her team. She wanted to see Blaine and Magnus and Victoria and Ezekiel and Samuel.

Especially Samuel: he would be the one to tell them that they had done the very best that could be expected, and that he was proud of the fierce fight that they'd put up against impossible odds. He'd be the one to tell them that they were still going to win this.

"Spartans," O'Donnell continued, "I know how you must feel, but you must understand that, of all the lives lost in Paris today, none would have hit this world harder than your own. I know that the orders you were given conflicted with every moral fiber in you, and for that I apologize. But you must know: it was for the greater good. There is more at stake here than one city, or one country, one continent—or even one planet."

He paused, drawing a breath. Stephanie took one herself, working to maintain her composure.

"Everything, every single piece of life in the galaxy is at risk if we do not hit the Parasite with everything we have. The Flood must be stopped." The General said. "And today, above all else, we made it clear that we will not roll over and die. We will not go down without a fight. And, if they want this planet, then they'll have to take it the old-fashioned way, because we'll give 'em Hell for as long as we can, no matter what the cost." He sighed. "Thank you for your help, Spartans. We could not have done it without you."

"Thank you, sir." Alex said quietly.

The General paused for only a second before he finished. "Now, you will have a short break in another base in southern Spain where you will meet up with \*\*Spartan 047\*\*."

\_Jade\_, Stephanie thought.

"After that, you'll be transported to the \_Atonement of Reach\_ for a series of seek-and-destroy missions for additional Flood-controlled ships."

"Sir-" Stephanie started.

"I'm sorry," he interrupted her, "these orders are straight from higher-ups at ONI, not from me."

"ONI gave us new orders?" Jason asked bitterly.

"Cassandra Rose," O'Donnell said. "If you want any more information, you'll have to take it up with her or her subordinates."

"Yes sir."

"Just so we're clear," he added, "I opted to give you a longer rest-period, but was harshly and vastly overruled. I'm afraid this is final. Report to the \_Atonement\_ by 0600 tomorrow. That's an order."

Stephanie sighed, daydreaming of the peaceful times they'd had before the Flood arrived as she looked out of the Pelican at the burning city. \_I'll miss you guys,\_ she thought. \_Stay safe. We'll see you soonâ€¦all of you.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Well, that's all for the ground segment folks! Yeah, I know...how dare I send them away, right? Well...trust me, it's for the best. And they're not gone for good. You have my word. I have a sequel to write, after all. ;)<strong>

\*\*Now, I am, as we speak, trying to finish the very last chapter of Zulu Company: The Last Stand. I will do my very best to get it done and posted by tomorrow before I go home for Spring Break, but I'm telling you all this right now:\*\*

\*\*THIS IS MY LAST CHAPTER! I AM GOING TO DO IT RIGHT!\*\*

\*\*That's code for "if I don't like how it sounds, I will edit and fix it until I DO like it." I apologize if that means that I edit for an

extra day or two with Samson's help, but it's how it's gonna be.  
Thank you all! Please review for me, if you don't mind.\*\*

\*\*I'll talk to you all later. ;) \*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

## 61. Chapter 60: The Last Stand

\*\*Author's Notes: Okay...one very important note -  
><strong>\*\*

>I apologize for the delay. What I thought would be about a 7000 word chapter turned out to be...(drumroll please)...EIGHTEEN THOUSAND (18,000) WORDS, so it took a CONSIDERABLE amount of time to proof, edit, check for problems (Thank you Samson...), and...oh yeah, TYPE. It was a real pain there for a little while, lol.<strong>

\*\*But, I swore I would do it right. And I would like to think that I did. If you disagree...well, I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about that now. Sorry.\*\*

\*\*Anyway, REVIEWS:\*\*

\*\*Redflame101: I apologize. Spartan 047 is Jade Cross. I had several people ask that in reviews, and the chapter has since been edited to include a short line identifying her. I guess, 'cause I knew who it was, I got ahead of myself and assumed everyone else did too. Anyway, enjoy the end of the story!\*\*

\*\*hell hound cerberus: lol, glad you enjoyed it. The song Zeke had played was "Breaking The Habit" by Linkin Park. Sorry...I have a thing for rock and alternative. hehehe.\*\*

\*\*vernox: lol, fair enough. Sorry to keep you waiting...as I said, long chapter. And about the review system: I've had others complain about the exact same issues (what do you think, armoured-blade?). Enjoy the end of the story, and I'll have the Epilogue out pretty soon too. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*Snipess: Well, I took my time, like you said, lol. Hopefully you get the quality you were looking for. Glad you liked the end of the ground portion. Let's see if I can top it. ;) Thank you!\*\*

\*\*MrHotShotGolfer: Hey! Looks like everyone enjoyed the end of the ground portion. Glad to hear it...really. lol. And don't worry so much about ONI...they're little fish compared to what I've got cooking. ;) Oh yeah...sorry for the delay, lol. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

\*\*I-kill-jackals: lol, cool! hehe, everyond loves a good all-out war. And THANK YOU, someone commented on the explosives, lol. And, if you're really re-reading it all...you are didicated, my friend. And thank you for that...just don't forget where we're at before I get this posted. ;) hehe.\*\*

\*\*killrman83ca: lol, I appreciate your undying willingness to help me out, but I can assure you: this part of story is taken care of, and my sequel is set to burst from my mind at any minute. Although, in

the event that I have a problem (Writer's Block or what have you), I'm sure there's plenty of support on this particular review page, lol. ;) Also, in mine, the Memorial Service that was done in Halo 3 has already passed. I knew that I couldn't do a good job writing it, so I refrained from doing anything at all with it. Don't wanna mess with a good thing.

>Also, was fortunate enough to play Halo Wars myself (thank Samson AGAIN...hehehe...that's working on being my tagline...lol). Easy to get the hang of, and very fast-paced. I've become a fan of Starcraft, so I'm used to the slower games...this was a real shock to my system. hehe. But a good game, nonetheless.<strong>

**\*\*outlaw hunter:** hahaha, don't end my story yet! I got the end of the space portion yet...and I think (HOPE) that you all will enjoy it just as well. I pulled out all the stops, even a few I was going to save for my sequel...but I think it all came out quite well. As for your question...well, I can't really answer that for you. Just remember this: all three of my planned stories are called ZULU Company for a reason. That's all I'll say. Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*the-super-saiyan-jedi-again:** Glad you liked it! And yeah...the battle, ultimately, was lost in Paris. It's the Flood. This isn't a pack of Brutes that you can just mow down with a rifle or a Fuel Rod Gun. Freakin' Flood. I hated them in the game...and I still hate them. Does it show? hehehe. Also, Spartan 047 is Jade Cross. My bad, lol. It's been fixed...\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Thank you for the flattering compliment...though the level "The Library" from Halo: CE did a much better job of portraying the Flood as creepy, evil buggers than I could ever dream of doing. ANYONE who doesn't remember that: I would encourage you to go back and play it on Legendary, in the dark, by yourself. By the way, bring your Shotgun. Enjoy the end of the story! Thanks!\*\*

**\*\*Eternity Of Night:** Dun Dun Dun-Dun-Dun...  
><strong>**\*\*Thank you. ;)\*\***

**\*\*aguynextdoor:** Hey, thanks very much! It's good to hear from new people who enjoy my story. As for Zeke...well, events are already in motion...not much I can change now, be that good or bad. lol. Thanks again!\*\*

**\*\*Samus 117:** You enjoyed the ground part, huh? YES! So far...I think everyone has. lol. Or, at least everyone who said something. Also, I tried to give Stephanie some more spotlight in this segment than she normally gets, and it seems to have worked pretty well. Yeah...I hope I reach my goal too, lol. Thanks for reviewing for me! Enjoy!\*\*

**\*\*ikldmrogers:** Glad you liked the end of the ground portion! To answer your question: no, not as of right now. At least, not any time soon. And certainly not in this book, lol. And I did take my time, as you and everyone else are probably painfully aware of. haha. As for Daniel...Zeke would be mildly upset with you. ;) Sellout!\*\*

**\*\*Samson00:** HAHA! DID IT! This is IT! And you're going to have your own page in my credits...lol. Yeah, I know, stop paying so you so much attention in the review-section, yada-yada-yada...I'm done. ;)

You already know what's coming (only proofed for me a thousand times)...so revel in the fact that it's finally come to the big finish!\*\*

\*\*Taylor114: FUBAR is a good word to describe that last chapter, yes. lol. If you do go back and re-read the whole thing...please don't judge me on the early chapters, lol. They need some SERIOUS revamping (and some just need scrapped and re-done). lol. But have fun and let me know how it goes, regardless! Also, glad you liked the part with the boy. Had to have SOME positive point to the chapter (originally, I considered just having the whole city detonate without a single glimmer...but, I figured, might as well give the Spartans something to remember that didn't inspire tears. lol. Enjoy the end!\*\*

\*\*USMC X: Hey! Long time, no talk! Good to hear from you! Oh, before I forget, two things:  
>(1) I'm a Starcraft man, myself. ;) But I understand.<br>(2) I loved the C4 joke. That was good stuff. Made me laugh...for a while. ;)

>As for your bones, questions, comments, etc...let me address whatever I can:<strong>

\*\*(Nova Company) - I knew from the start that they wouldn't be terribly well-liked by most people in this story. The truth is, it's hard to go 50 chapters with a team of individuals, let everyone get to know them, and then throw an entire new TEAM seemingly out of nowhere. I've tried to incorporate them and mesh them with Zulu a bit...but there's only so much I can do without getting sidetracked from the real plot of the story. And THAT I won't give up on for anything. That being said, rest assured that the members of Nova have quite a bit of growing to do...and that you will see them again in the future.\*\*

\*\*(Victoria) - Her death, I think everyone will agree, is odd. Everyone has some bone to pick with it. Truth is, I wanted it that way. I want people to question a LOT of things, not just about her, but about other things too. And, I promise you, everything about her abduction, return, general attitude, and death are exactly as I wanted them. Finally, in regards to her treatments at ONI: these will be delved into in the sequel. The reason I wait is two-fold:  
>(1) It helps my process to keep readers in the dark to give my story just a LITTLE suspense. ;)<br>(2) There really was no good way to do it this time around, with the Spartans in space, fighting the Flood, and her quick death...there was just no good, reasonable way to give out a lot of information. For that, I apologize, but again...exactly as I intended.\*\*

\*\*(Zeke & Magnus) Yeah...her death will have more effects than what you've seen so far. You can be sure of that. ;)\*\*

\*\*(Gravemind) You are 100 percent correct: Gravemind was completely and utterly destroyed at the end of Halo 3. However, it has been speculated that, when the Forerunner fought the Flood, multiple Graveminds could have easily been present (though, it's unknown, as they would all have the same goals and their orders would be nigh-impossible to differentiate because of it). Now the question I pose to you is this: where is the one that I make reference to? And you're going to grow to HATE this line (for that, I apologize again...): it is exactly as I have planned it.\*\*

**\*\*AND THIS GOES FOR EVERYONE:** If you see something that is not a blatant error, but you wonder about it, you think, "hmmm...I'm not sure about this," then there is a good chance that it is a part of my big picture. That being said...I DO make errors (ask Samson), and if you catch something that you think poses problems, by all means, tell me. I would rather correct it than let you all go on assuming I knew it was there and had an excuse, lol.\*\*

**\*\*BACK to USMC X:** And thanks for the positive reinforcement on the Gravemind lines...I HATE rhyming for speech. It sounds so terrible to write and to read...but, glad to know that it all went over fairly well.\*\*

**\*\*Finally,** you should know, you stepped on no nerves, and I did enjoy your review (particularly the C4 line, lol). I've got tough skin. I get enough praise for this story (whether deserved or undeserved) that I can take constructive criticism. As I think I've commented to you before: you're polite, your reviews are well-formatted and thought-out, and you address specific points you take issue with. In regards to criticism, I could never ask for anything more. Thank you very much. :)\*\*

**\*\*Bubbles:** lol, I think you can forget about the whole "not reviewing for a while" thing...vacation kinda covers that. ;) And it's good to see someone else who enjoyed Stephanie's moments of rage. I haven't gotten to make good ones for her in a while. lol. Enjoy the end (even though...you know a little of what's coming...oh well). \*\*

**\*\*WOW,** thanks to everyone for those, and enjoy the end of Zulu Company: The Last Stand!!!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><p>

**\*\*Chapter 60:\*\***

â€" **\*\*The Last Stand** â€" \*\*

**\*\*2030 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\***

**\*\*UNSC Remodelled Reconstruction And Deforestation Vessel (Prowler-Class) - Groombridge System\*\***

Samuel stood in complete, undisturbed silence at one end of the Prowler, waiting anxiously as it approached the four Flood-controlled starships that he and Magnus had been watching on the viewscreen for the last several minutes. Unfortunately, the closer they got, the more the brown-armored Spartan questioned whether or not they would even be able to make any sort of difference.

After all, six Spartans had boarded the Covenant Assault Carrier and, at this point, at least two of them could be presumed dead. And for what?

\_Nothing,\_ Samuel thought bitterly, clenching his fists at his sides and scowling. \_They died for nothing.\_ \_Only Ezekiel could even conceivably have died for a cause, and that still requires Blaine and Nathan to be able to fight their way to the ship's generator.\_

"Samuel," a female voice echoed inside his head. He recognized it as Gael's.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Well," the AI said, "first of all: I've established an uplink to the Covenant \_CCS\_ and should be able to open one of the hangars when we arrive, which will be in three minutes."

"Good work," Samuel said.

"And secondly," she said, "there's something that you need to know."

"About?"

"Victoria."

"Later." Sam said, closing his eyes. "I really just need to focus right now."

"Okay." The AI's tone was laced with disappointment, but Samuel didn't let it get to him. He had to focus. The Flood had to be stopped. And, as of that momentâ€¦he still had no idea how he and Magnus were going to pull it off.

Sure, they could get the Anti-Matter Bombs and use one on each ship. There'd be more than enough on the Covenant \_CCS\_; that wasn't the problem. The problem was that, no matter what they did, they were sure to encounter insane amounts of resistance once the Gravemind realized exactly what it was they were up to. Nothing was going to change that.

Samuel did a mental check of their weapons and ammunition. He still had almost sixty shots between his two M90 Shotguns and four good shots with the Spartan Laser, along with two of every grenade, except for the Firebomb, of which he had one.

Magnus on the other hand, still had his Shotgun, Battle Rifle, and the Heavy Machine Gun on his back, though Samuel imagined that he couldn't have much left in the chain-gun.

"What's your count look like?" Sam asked.

Magnus didn't answer for several seconds, staring out one of the windows of the Prowler, into space. "Say what?"

"Your ammunition count," Samuel repeated, "what does it look like?"

"Twenty-nine in the M90, eighty-four in the BR, sixty in the turret, and twenty Fuel Rods," Magnus said, rattling them all off as if he had them memorized.

Samuel's eyes widened slightly, processing all the information. Even with that amount of firepower, it just meant that they'd be able to kill a fair number of Flood.

But the Flood never had a fair number. They always had an

almost-inconceivable number of troops available at a moment's notice. It was unreal.

"Landing in thirty seconds," Gael said.

"Alright," he answered. "When we do, lock this thing down. Got it?"

"Sure," Gael replied. "No problem."

Samuel nodded, taking a breath and glancing out the window. He watched as the field separating the hangar from space vanished into nothingness.

"Ready for this?" he asked, pumping the Shotgun.

Magnus let out a long, slow breath. "Let's kill 'em all."

Sam nodded, leading the way as the Prowler's door slid open to reveal an eerie, dimly-lit chamber shrouded in purple light. The brown-armored Spartan scowled.

He hated Covenant ships.

"Clear," he said, swinging the Shotgun back and forth as he stepped down onto the floor of the ship. Magnus jumped down behind him, landing with a dull thud.

"So, where are these bombs?"

"Gael?"

The AI took a moment to respond. "Look to your left. There's a door at the end of the chamber. It connects to a hallway that will wind around and take you up one level. Follow that and I'll lead you from there."

"You get all that, Magnus?"

A green light flickered at the corner of his HUD.

"Alright, let's go."

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine exhaled sharply, putting his hands on his knees for only a second before yanking his boot out of the pile of disgusting, half-rotted biomass that he'd turned the last Tank Form into. "Bastard," he growled.<p>

"We're getting closer." Nathan said from beside him. "The farther we go, the more desperate they get."

Blaine nodded, standing up to his full height and looking around for additional contacts. Sure enough, the room was clean, for now.

"We've still got another two corridors and another pair of hangars to pass through." He answered. "It's gonna get worse before it gets better."



"You haven't seemed to have any problems yet," Nathan joked.

Blaine scowled. "We haven't encountered real resistance yet." He said. "When we do, rest assured that we'll need all the firepower we can muster."

Nathan didn't answer, and Blaine wished for a second that he could have someone from his own team present. He didn't even care who. He was just tired of this Nova Company kid who, from what he had seen, didn't have a clue what they were up against.

Though, to be fair to Nathan " and the rest of Nova " they were younger than the members of Zulu Company. It wasn't by much, but Blaine got the distinct impression that they hadn't been around the block quite as much either. While it was true that Zulu had only really had a small handful of real missions, each one had presented a new challenge, unique and difficult.

Those select few missions had made Spartans out of the augmented individuals that had emerged from the base in Arizona.

\_They're not ready for the Flood yet,\_ Blaine thought sadly, glancing at the Spartan beside him.

That was another thing that he had disapproved of in this particular mission: the team-stacking. He knew that Nathan had uses, and that Samuel had obviously gotten a good read on them, or he would've never elected to bring him along to the most dangerous place in the solar system.

But he could've brought along someone else as well.

Blaine was sure that, by bringing Nathan along by himself and plunging him into this God-forsaken Hellhole with a group of individuals that " by all rights " were all completely different than the Spartans ONI had originally imagined

It was the wrong decision.

Or, at least, Blaine believed that it was. Nathan should have had another member from Nova Company come with him. He was still young, in terms of actual combat-experience against the Covenant, and in the same boat as the rest of them when it came to the Flood. The only thing that had made Blaine comfortable when they arrived was the knowledge that he had Samuel, Victoria, and Zeke to back him up.

Magnus and the firepower he provided was a nice touch too but, honestly, Blaine didn't trust him. He didn't believe the giant Spartan to be a traitor or anything remotely so dramatic

He just didn't trust him to be a team player. That was acceptable from Ezekiel, but Zulu Company didn't need another socially-dysfunctional member with borderline-psychotic tendencies.

"Hey Blaine, what's on your mind?"

"Nothing, Taylor," Blaine answered, unsure of why he used Nathan's

last name. He brushed the thought aside. "Let's keep moving."

With that, he stepped forward and led the way to the door at the far end of the hangar. It slid open to reveal a dimly-lit corridor, nearly identical to the rest that the Spartans had seen thus far.

"Great," Nathan said sarcastically, "more tunnels."

"Yeah," Blaine growled, "eyes up. We've got a long way to go."

\* \* \*

><p>Magnus stepped through the door and back into the hangar that he and Samuel had entered from the Prowler.<p>

Only this time, he was on the second level, looking down on the empty chamber.

"Left turn," Gael said, her voice echoing in both the Spartans' helms, "then take the second doorway. Follow the corridor, and hang a right."

"Sure," Magnus mumbled, following Samuel with his Shotgun drawn. This entire ship gave him the chills. Everything about it: the lighting, the dead silence that followed the two super-soldiers, the lack of bodies or blood or-

Anything.

They hadn't encountered a single Flood form of any kind since they'd boarded. Nothing. There were no Pure Forms, no Combat Formsâ€|not even a scurrying little Infection Form to hint at the possibility of an attack.

Nothing.

"I keep waiting on something to round the corner," Magnus said darkly as he followed Samuel through the doorway. "You know?"

Samuel nodded in front of him. Then he stopped. "You might get your wish."

"What?"

Without a sound, Samuel raised his right hand, still holding the Shotgun, and pointed loosely to the 'T' intersection up ahead in the corridor. On the right side of it, Magnus could barely make out the very edges of what appeared to be a tentacle, draped across the floor. He raised his own Shotgun, ready.

"Got your back," Magnus said as Samuel took a cautious step forward. A green light blinked in his HUD.

He watched anxiously as Sam rounded the corner, Shotgun raised-

Nothing. Samuel shook his head.

"Dead one," the brown-armored soldier said.

Magnus scowled. "Doesn't make sense," he said. "I thought we were the only ones here."

"So did I."

With that, Samuel continued down the corridor and Magnus followed close behind. He only risked a quick glance at the dead Flood form on the ground around the corner.

\_What the Hell?\_ He thought, eyes wide.

The creature looked remotely like one of the Tank Forms, at least in that it was large, bipedal, and had the same disgusting, feeler-stuffed crevice where the mouth should have been. There were two major differences however: the first was that this particular Flood form was enormous. If it were still alive, it would've towered over even Magnus and Samuel. By his assessment, the green-armored Spartan believed that it had to have been almost eighteen feet tall.

The other, even more disturbing difference was the arms, or rather, lack thereof. Instead of the bulky, trunk-like arms of the Pure Form, this creature appeared to have two insanely-long tentacles that stretched almost twenty-feet along the ground. And, to make matters worse, the ends looked like some kind of primitive pincers or claws, clasped together and forming a tight pyramid-shape that ended in a single, deadly point.

"You have any idea what that thing was?" Magnus asked, glancing back to make sure that nothing was following them.

"No," Samuel answered, "no I don't. But I'm not a fan."

"Makes two of us," he muttered.

"Just keep your eyes peeled," Sam said, "nothing we can't handle. Seriously, you're a walking cannon. What are you afraid of?"

Magnus grinned slightly. "Good point."

"You're close," Gael's voice suddenly resounded inside the Spartans' minds. "There's a door thirty-meters farther down the corridor, on your left. The bombs should be in there."

"What room is it?" Samuel asked.

"It's not really labeled," Gael said, "but it's basically a prep-room for Elite Rangers and other soldiers involved in boarding action."

Magnus nodded as they approached the door. It was glowing red.

"Perfect," he growled, putting his back to the wall at one side of the door.

"I can open it." Gael said as Samuel did the same, on the other side. The brown-armored Spartan removed the neuro-chip from his helmet and inserted the AI into a terminal several feet away, on the other side

of the hall.

"Get ready," Samuel said, bringing both Shotguns to bear. Magnus took a deep breath as the door changed colors.

It slid open and both Spartans charged inside-

"The Hellâ€¦|" Magnus said, looking around.

The room was similar to the hangar, in that it was almost completely dark, except for a dim, purple light. It was small, roughly the same size as the sparring cage that Zulu had used to practice in during training.

And it was stuffed to the brim with various weapons, equipment-

And five Covenant Anti-Matter bombs.

"Jackpot," Magnus said, staring at the big, awkward looking explosives. Each of the explosives in front of him was covered in long, dangerous-looking spikes.

"Something's wrong," Sam growled, looking around. "Something's very wrong." He shook his head, exhaling hard. "We should've encountered something by now. There's no way that the Flood are just gonna let us have our way."

Magnus nodded. He knew that Samuel was right.

It was too easy.

Samuel walked over to a terminal and removed Gael from the ship's computers. He'd only taken a single step when the AI spoke.

"We've got a serious problem." She said.

"Yeah?" Samuel said, exasperated. "Tell me something I don't know."

"I've been monitoring the ship's security files." The AI said. "You remember our friend in the hallway?"

Magnus felt a chill go down his spine.

"Yeah," Sam said.

"He's not there anymore."

"Oh Hell," Magnus said.

"But that thing didn't move." Gael said. "Four Combat Forms came in and moved it. They drug it away from where we are now, toward another hangar."

"Tell me it's dead." Samuel said.

"I believe so."

"Alright," Sam said, "set one of these bombs." He pulled the neuro-chip out and gave it to Magnus, who slid it into his

helmet.

"Just hold your hand over the bomb," Gael said.

Magnus nodded and did as he was told. He watched as the top of one of the charges began to glow red.

"It's set." The AI said.

"How long?"

"Forty minutes."

Samuel nodded as Magnus pulled the neuro-chip back out of his helmet and gave it back to the leading Spartan. "If we need more time than that, we're done anyway."

"How we gonna do this?" Magnus asked.

"We'll each grab two." Samuel said. "We should only need three, but I like having a backup-plan."

Magnus nodded, gripping two of the giant, spiked charges and pulling them across the floor, toward the doorway. Samuel was right behind him.

They moved at a slow pace back through the corridor, straining their bodies to move the explosives two-at-a-time. The spikes didn't make things any easier – the ones out in front caught the metal floor and were what made the entire process of pulling them a colossal pain.

In a few minutes, they'd come back to the intersection.

And, as expected, the giant, unknown Flood form was gone.

"She was right." Magnus said, letting go of the explosives as he peeked around the corner. He sighed. "Clear."

After another minute, they'd reached the second floor of the hangar-

Magnus' eyes went wide. "Uh, Sam?" he said, shaking his head as he stared at the force standing directly in front of the Prowler. "You'd better look at this."

\* \* \*

><p>"Next hangar," Blaine said, "outside this door." He watched the Covenant-style entrance intently, trying to guess the size of the army of Flood that would inevitably be waiting on the other side.<p>

He realized after a moment that he just didn't know. He had no way to judge what kind of force was anxiously awaiting their arrival. Given the fact that it was going to be one of the last two chances for the Flood to stop them, however, he could imagine that it wasn't going to be small.

"Here we go," Nathan said, pumping the Shotgun. Blaine cracked his

knuckles and walked up to the door.

It slid open, and he took an involuntary step back.

"Holy shit," he said.

There were a dozen Ranged Forms that he saw at first glance, perched on the walls and watching the door with an eerie attentiveness that the Spartan couldn't even describe. In addition, more than twenty Combat Forms stood between them and the next doorway, all of them armed with weapons of varying strength.

And, to top it all off, three of the Tank Forms were mixed in as well, ready to crush anything foolish enough to come within their grasp.

"Well, this sucks." Nathan said bluntly.

"Elite," Blaine said into the intercom, "are you seeing this?"

It took a moment for the Sangheili to respond. "Yes, Demon," he answered. "I'm watching them."

"What do they have that's heavy?"

"Heavy?"

"Dangerous weapons," Blaine said, rolling his eyes. "What are their big guns?"

"There is one of your Rocket Launchers and also a Shotgun."

"Where the Hell did they get human weapons?" Nathan asked.

"They were probably taken as trophies from an attack." Breka said.

Blaine nodded, putting all the pieces together in his mind and running through the scenarios. "Okay." He said. "Let's do this."

"Got a plan?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah," he said, "we go in and deal with the Ranged Forms first. Use Plasma Grenades and Spikes if you've got them."

"I've got a BR too." Nathan said.

Blaine scoffed. "Save that for the Combat Forms," he said. "Those Ranged Forms are nothing but biomass, and they've got a tough shell. A three-round burst from the BR will be like a bee-sting. Trust me: stick to grenades."

"Fair enough," Nathan answered behind him.

"On my mark," Blaine said. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Go!"

The two Spartans burst into the room, and Blaine began winging explosives in every direction as he sprinted toward the group of

Combat and Tank Forms, dodging dozens and dozens of spikes from the creatures mounted on the walls. He had a total of five grenades: two Spikes and two Plasma Grenades, as well as a single Firebomb. Nathan had only three, and each one stuck to one of the Ranged Forms.

That still left two more.

The white-armored Spartan closed on the group and searched for the one light weapon that he thought he could use on the last pair of Ranged Forms. He felt bullets from an SMG bounce off his shields; a single Shotgun blast from several meters hit him, but failed to do major damage at such a rangeâ€|

Something sharp dug into his side. Then another. Then another-

He threw himself onto the floor in time to dodge the rest of the clip from the Needler, then used his arms to flip back up â€" landing solidly on one of the unarmed Combat Forms.

Before the one wielding the Needler could fire again, Blaine had covered the distance to it, tearing the tentacles off one of its brethren before grabbing the former Elite by its deformed shoulder, slamming it to the ground and stepping on its chest cavity.

He ripped the Needler from its hand, reloaded it, and fired nine shots into one of the remaining Ranged Forms. The glowing pink shards connectedâ€|one, two, three, four, five, six, seven-

A bright, pink explosion engulfed the creature and triggered an inhuman scream of agony as it fell off the wall and crashed to the metal base of the hangar. Blaine turned a one-eighty and unloaded another seven into the last of the Ranged Forms. Seven shots into it, the undead terror detonated in a similar fashion and fell from its perch.

Blaine reloaded the gun again and found that there were only sixteen needles left in it. "Damn it," he growled, turning around just in time for a Combat Form to catch him in the chest with its tentacles. The biomechanical Spartan was knocked off balance and, before he could recover, a second swipe by another of the Flood forms knocked him to the ground.

He felt the floor shake as one of the hulking Tank Forms approached him from the left side. Knowing what was coming, he attached the Needler to his thigh and rolled to the right-

The Tank Form's giant arm crashed into the floor where he had just been.

Blaine stood and backed up several steps. He heard another of their demonic screams off to his right and stepped back as one of the Combat Forms came down from a leap, right where he was standing. The momentum of its jump forced the creature to keep moving-

The Spartan stuck his right arm out and clotheslined the alien, then turned slightly to the right and sent his other fist crashing down into its chest before it hit the floor.

Even as he did it, though, Blaine saw another tentacle coming his way. He stuck his hands out and grabbed the appendage, the impact of

which drained his shields entirely. Grinning and still holding the limb, Blaine spun to the left and threw the Combat Form into a pair of its brethren, knocking all three to the ground and ripping the tentacle off at the shoulder.

Blaine was enjoying his work for only a split-second before he heard something cock behind him. He knew the sound well and spun left, out of the way before-

BANG!

He had only just barely dodged a blast from the Shotgun at point-blank range. Before the former-Brute could move, the Spartan reached over and grabbed the Shotgun by the barrel. He pulled "hard" and ripped the decomposing arm that was holding the weapon clean off the undead creature.

"See ya," he growled, turning the dangerous firearm around and blasting the half-rotted, reanimated corpse to the floor with a gaping hole in its chest.

Blaine wasted no time. With four shots loaded in the Shotgun, he turned on the Pure Form behind him and began blasting.

BANG!

The creature stumbled backward as he continued to walk toward it.

BANG!

It put one of its giant limbs in front of its tentacle-filled maw. Blaine stepped forward, but waited patiently. After a moment, the alien moved its arm-

The white-armored Spartan pulled his right arm all the way back and sent his fist crashing into the alien's face. The Flood biomass caved as the Tank Form fell over backwards from the impact.

Blaine grinned and stepped forward, smashing its corpse with his boot before it could even contemplate getting up. He managed to insert two more shells into the gun before he heard another one coming from the left.

When the Combat Form was less than six feet away, he pumped the Shotgun.

"Goodbye."

The roar of the Shotgun filled the chamber again as the rotting form was literally blown in half, pieces of green, decomposing tissue spraying everywhere. The body hadn't even fallen yet when Blaine heard another scream and turned to face it.

What was in front of him was a former-Elite, and it let out another shriek as it leapt into the air twenty-yards away, intending to come right down on the Spartan before it. Blaine felt a smirk crawl across his face as he planted his right foot behind him, waiting for the creature to fall.



The result very much resembled a play from an old game that Blaine had heard about: football. The screaming, undead monster came down right on the Spartan-

And Blaine shoulder-checked the wretched creature. It drained his shields completely, but all the momentum in the world wasn't enough to move the half-ton Spartan. Instead, the force behind the creature's leap caused its rotting, crumbling flesh to bend and fold around his armor-

And the creature basically exploded as its body reached its undead limits and gave in. Putrid green gas and flesh splattered against Blaine's armor and helmet.

"Disgusting," he growled bitterly. The Spartan started to turn, but heard footsteps behind him and a quick, harsh shriek. The steps ceased, and he knew that the Combat Form had leapt into the air.

Blaine smiled, put the Shotgun over his shoulder, pointing into the air behind his head. He waited two seconds, and pulled the trigger-

BANG!

There was another scream as the biomechanical soldier side-stepped to the right, and the dead Combat Form crashed into the ground in front of where he had just been standing, directly on top of the Pure Form that he'd killed only seconds before.

"You guys suck," Blaine said, rolling his eyes. He glanced over to check on Nathan's progress.

The Nova Company Spartan was holding a Shotgun of his own and facing eleven of the former-Elite Combat Forms, only one of which appeared to be armed, and it was only carrying an SMG.

One of the aliens lashed out with its disgusting tentacles, but Nathan ducked low and fired the Shotgun, blasting the legs clean off of the hideous creature and leaving it to flail around on the metal floor.

Blaine cringed as a second Combat Form struck from behind, swinging its tentacles right at Nathan as he turned-

A bright, blue circle of compressed energy suddenly appeared on the Spartan's left forearm, blocking the strike from the Flood attacker, and Nathan spun around and stuck the Shotgun right up to the monster's chest and pulled the trigger.

Another roar permeated the chamber, and another undead horror hit the ground in a heap.

\_Not bad,\_ Blaine thought with a grin, \_not bad at all.\_

Nathan primed a Frag Grenade and dropped it at his feet before jumping and rolling away from the group of Combat Forms, coming to rest next to one wall of the hangar just as the explosive detonated. Shrapnel flew in all directions and swallowed three of the remaining creatures in the blast.

"Rule one!" Nathan shouted as he stood up, "when you see that the UNSC sent a Spartan," he pumped the Shotgun as another Combat Form charged him.

BANG!

"That meansâ€¦that it's timeâ€¦"

BANG!

"To go home!"

BANG!

The eighth attacker was blown to bits by the terrible power of the UNSC M90 Shotgun. That left only three remaining Combat Forms, and Nathan seemed to be perfectly aware of them as the one with the SMG charged from behind, spraying bullets into the Spartan's shields.

The super-soldier turned, rammed the alien with his mounted shield and grabbed the SMG at the same time, just as the tenth former-Elite closed the distance to him as well.

"Hey Blaine," Nathan shouted, "you're watchin' this, right?" He turned around just in time to put the SMG right to the abdomen of the undead Elite and emptied the entire remaining clip into its chest. Then he turned around to the other one, who was just standing up-

BANG!

"Ten down," he said, circling around to face the last Combat Form, "one to go-"

The repulsive creature was already attacking, swinging its tentacles so hard that they dented the wall as they came by to strike Nathan. Blaine watched as, with his right shoulder toward the Combat Form, Nathan activated his shield to block the strike.

Then, without a second's hesitation, he activated the other shield on his left arm and spun to the left. The result was that the second shield smashed into the alien's side and sent it crashing into the wall.

Before the monster could even move from its place on the wall, Nathan turned, raised his right foot, and sent it straight out â€" going right through the Flood's chest and not stopping until it connected with the metal behind it.

"Not bad, Nathan," Blaine said, focusing on the younger Spartan.

"Yeah," he answered, "thanks man." He paused. "Hey, you got company."

Blaine turned to see a trio of Combat Forms and the two remaining Pure Forms slowly, methodically approaching him from behind in almost complete silence.

"You know," he said, "I think I like you guys better quiet." He pulled the Needler back up from his thigh and opened fire on one of the Pure Forms. Eight shots later, multiple pink explosions engulfed the creature, and it fell to the floor in a heap. Grinning, he turned and emptied the rest of the needles into the other Tank Form, even as the three former-Covenant soldiers screamed and charged.

"You want any help?" Nathan's voice echoed inside his helmet. Blaine scoffed.

"You kiddin' me?" he asked. "I'm just getting started."

And then, Blaine Everson dropped the Needler and pulled the Gravity Hammer from his back.

"Oh, shit," Nathan said, laughing.

"Oh yes," Blaine replied, tapping the head of the hammer in his hand. "Come and get it, you bastards!"

For the first time, the Combat Forms seemed to attack as one, and they all attacked from different sides, swinging their tentacles and screaming and-

CRACK!

The handle of Blaine's great hammer smashed into what would have once been a Covie's ribcage, and then he tilted it up, effectively throwing the former-Elite as he spun around and sent that same handle crashing down on a former-Brute's skull. He shoved the Combat Form over and plunged the end of the grip into its chest.

The third one screamed and hit him from behind, knocking him over, but Blaine only smiled in spite of the pain. It jumped right on top of him and tried to beat him with its disgusting appendages, but the white-armored Spartan had finally had enough.

Blaine Everson reached up, grabbed the sickening creature by its decomposing throat, and pulled it down to him, where he head-butted it hard enough to literally knock the Brute's skull somewhere into its chest.

And it must have hit the Infection Form too, because the creature suddenly fell to the ground, limp and unmoving.

"Damn, man!" Nathan hollered, clapping. "Not too shabby! Seriously, you-" He stopped suddenly. "Blaine, look out!"

Calmly â€" almost casually â€" the white-armored soldier turned to watch as the last remaining Combat Form in the hangar fired a standard, UNSC HEAT Rocket right at him from across the room. Without the slightest emotion, Blaine sent the hammer crashing into the floor in front of him, just in time to deflect the rocket and reroute it into one of the side-walls.

The biomechanical Spartan grabbed the Mauler from his thigh and tossed it casually into the air, grabbing it by the very end of the handle. Then he reared back with his arm and flung it as hard as he could, directly at the undead Brute.

It was flawless. The blade on the end of the Mauler caught the creature right in its chest and buried itself there, killing whatever small, creepy balloon-like creature might have been inhabiting it. The Combat Form fell over, dead.

"And that," Blaine said, putting the hammer back on his armor, "is how you clear a hangar." He looked around at the dead bodies littering the floor. "Any questions?"

\* \* \*

><p>"That is an ugly-ass Flood form." Magnus said, still looking down at the enormous creature that was standing directly between the two Zulu Company Spartans and the Prowler. It was the same one from the hallway, and was easily as large as Samuel had guessed that it was. Its tentacles were stretched loosely at its sides.<p>

Samuel nodded, trying to figure out a course of action. They didn't have time to sit and think of a solid plan. They had to move, now.

"Gael," he said, "you got any idea what that is?"

"Well," she said, "there's no technical data on it, but from what I could gather from the Battlecruiser's records, the Covenant call it a Juggernaut."

"Fitting," Samuel muttered.

"I can't get a full diagnostic scan, but those limbs are made of something insanely tough, not very different from the scythes that the Stalkers attacked with."

"It's not an infected Stalker," Samuel said disbelievingly. "It's too big."

"No," Gael said, "it's not. The Stalkers' bones are too thin. There's not enough calcium for an Infection Form to survive more than a couple of hours. It's a Pure Form."

"Great."

"Well, when the going gets tough," Magnus said, pulling the Heavy Machine Gun from his back, "the tough reach for bigger guns!"

He opened fire on the Juggernaut, and it instantly put its two giant limbs in front of its miserable excuse for a face. Dozens of shots echoed around the chamber as literally every shot Magnus had left in the gun hit " and bounced off of " the two giant appendages.

"What the Hell!" Magnus roared, simply dropping the gun at his feet. "You've gotta be kidding me! It didn't even phase it."

"Aw, crap." Samuel said. "Alright; time to leave." He gripped the Spartan Laser and held it on his shoulder. "Three"two"

There was a scream somewhere behind the two Spartans, and Samuel thought that it sounded extremely close. Before he could turn to see

it, however, the Combat Form had crashed into his back and sent him falling forward, clean off the second-story of the hangar. He crashed into the floor, and the Spartan Laser fell from his hand, skidding across the floor and stopping somewhere behind the giant Flood form.

The good news was that there was all of twenty-five feet between the floor of the hangar and the second story.

The bad news was that those twenty-five feet were all that had been keeping the Juggernaut away from Magnus and Samuel.

"Oh crap." Sam grumbled, rolling just in time to dodge one of the creature's massive tentacles as it crashed into the floor. The Combat Form that had tackled him was still lying there, and it was crushed in an instant.

"Hang on, Samuel!" Magnus yelled from the second story. Samuel heard mechanical parts moving, and a green ball of burning plasma suddenly crashed into the Juggernaut's back.

To Sam's surprise, the creature began to turn around, slowly-

Then, it suddenly whipped around in a fraction of a second and sent one of its limbs crashing into Magnus and tossing him across the overhang, until he slammed into a wall and fell to the hangar floor.

"Not helping!" Samuel shouted as he brought both Shotguns to bear. He ran up to the Juggernaut and fired twice, right into its flesh-

CRASH!

Its other limb crashed into the floor not six inches shy of Samuel's right shoulder, leaving a six-inch dent in the metal and leaving the Spartan a chance to circle around in an effort to get behind the Pure Form, to his Spartan Laserâ€¦

The Juggernaut spun again, this time swinging its tentacle horizontally and hitting Samuel square in the ribs, knocking him into one wall of the hangar, where he fell to the ground.

"Oh, man," he moaned, standing up slowly. "That hurt a little." He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, stabilizing himself. "Magnus! Are you enjoying your nap? I could use a little help down here!"

He held his arms up at an angle and took aim with the two prototype Sentinel Beams that ONI had left for him to use. Using his HUD he focused on the creature's disgusting maw and opened fire with the two beams.

The twin lasers cut through the air and hit the Juggernaut, but it quickly moved one of its tentacles into their path, and the attack was rendered useless.

\_What are you?\_ Samuel asked silently as he dodged another strike â€" this one more of a stab than a swipe. The tentacle's grasping claws formed a deadly-looking point and came straight at Sam, denting the wall behind him once again. Quickly, he took off and moved toward the

Prowler-

The other tentacle slammed into his stomach and sent him soaring. He hit the ground and skidded to a halt only a few meters from Magnus. To make matters worse, the creature now stood between them and the Prowler, and also between them and his Spartan Laser.

He checked the time.

Thirty four minutes.

Had it really only been about six minutes since they set the first of the Anti-Matter Bombs? Samuel couldn't believe it. It felt like ages ago.

"I'm up, Sam!" Magnus' voice echoed inside his helmet as the Spartan stood up. "What's the plan?"

Samuel had wondered the same thing. They didn't have the firepower to deal with this thing. Every time it stabbed at them or tried to crush them, it left major dents in even the unbelievably strong alloy that the Covenant ship's foundation was made of.

He tried to think. What would he do? What would he have his team do?

\_Use what you have.\_ He thought harder. \_Check your surroundings. Use the environment.\_

Then it hit him.

"Use your enemy's strength against it."

"What was that?" Magnus asked, poised for another dodge.

"Give me a boost!" Samuel shouted, and Magnus knew immediately what he meant, because he bent slightly and put his arms out in front of him, with one palm in the other, open toward the ceiling.

Samuel ran forward and put his right foot in the other Spartan's hands and was sent rocketing over the Juggernaut's head, landing solidly on the other side.

\* \* \*

><p>Magnus watched as the alien turned to face Samuel as he touched down behind it. It was slow though, and the green-armored Spartan had enough time to steel himself for his next task.<p>

"Hey! You! Over here!" He put a hand up and fired a single Fuel Rod into the Flood form's back-

With speed that belied its stature, the alien turned around and sent one of its giant appendages crashing into Magnus for a second time. He cursed under his breath as he was sent skidding along the ground.

Then he stood up, ready.

"Come on, freak!" He pulled out the Shotgun and fired in its

direction to keep its attention.

Out of the corner of his eye, Magnus watched Samuel run inside the Prowler.

"Hope you're not leavin' me here," Magnus said with a laugh.

"Just a minute," Sam answered. "Just distract him for a few seconds."

"Oh yeah," Magnus said sarcastically, "no problem! I live for this kind of thing! It's almost as good a nice, juicy steak!" He fired again, this time at the creature's legs.

One of its limbs came crashing into the ground right in front of Magnus, and he backed all the way up against the wall.

\* \* \*

><p>"Come on," Samuel said to himself, searching frantically for something other than the Pyrosene that Zeke had left aboard the ship. This was a Deforestation vessel, which meant that they would carry more than just Pyrosene. If he was lucky, they'd have Thermite. And, if he was really lucky-<p>

"Now we're talking." He said with a smile.

\* \* \*

><p>The Juggernaut's tentacle stabbed the wall right where Magnus' head had just been, and he dodged a second time at the last possible second, barely being missed by its next attempt.<p>

"Alright!" he shouted. "Now, it's time you and I had a talk!" He put the Shotgun on his thigh and gripped one tentacle in each hand, right behind the pincers.

No sooner had he done so that the alien took both appendages, smashed them into the floor, and then flung them up and over its body, effectively throwing Magnus into the opposite wall of the hangar and letting him fall the full forty-feet to the bottom.

"Ohâ€|" he moaned, first getting on his knees before putting his fists on the floor to stabilize himself. "Oh, Hellâ€|"

A thin shadow over his prompted him to throw himself to the side, just in time to avoid another strike.

"Samuel!" he shouted, panting. "You really should hurry up, unless you want to carry all three of those bombs yourself!"

"Just another thirty seconds!" Samuel yelled back, and Magnus felt his footsteps as he exited the Prowler. But, instead of charging toward Magnus and the Juggernaut, the steps grew weaker, and the green-armored Spartan knew that his leader was running to the far wall.

The question was why.

But that didn't matter. Samuel had asked for thirty seconds, and

Magnus was going to give it to him.

He forced himself to stand and looked up at the towering behemoth in front of him, which was still waving its tentacles through the air slowly, casually.

"Iâ€¦" Magnus started, trying to catch his breath. "I am gonna kick your ass." He held his hands out in front of him even as the alien pulled one of its tentacles back, balanced for another stabbing strike.

Suddenly, a voice echoed into his mind, deep and cold. "You will die, human."

BANG!

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel put both Shotguns to the Juggernaut's body and fired, barely ducking in time to avoid the ensuing horizontal strike as it turned to face him.<p>

"That's right!" he shouted. "Come and get me!" He jumped backwards, toward the far wall. As expected, the alien followed him, stabbing at the ground almost halfheartedly as he moved. Quickly, he put one Shotgun back on his thigh.

Samuel took a deep breath as he brushed up against the wall and the circular cord that he'd put up. To his right was the field that held the atmosphere in the hangar. To his left was a blue-lit Covenant doorway. The cord was right at his chest level, and if the Juggernaut didn't strike him there, it would all be for nothing. Everything had to go perfectly.

The giant, undead monster pulled back one of its tentacles and clasped the claws together to form the same lethal point that Samuel had seen earlier. He watched carefully, trying to read precisely when the alien would-

The strike came in a fraction of a second, and Samuel was ready. He used the detonator hidden in his left hand to trigger the charge on the wall, and the Thermite-Carbon Cord was suddenly ablaze. The intense heat instantly melted the alloy making up the wall and the Juggernaut's strike was aimed perfectlyâ€¦

For Samuel.

It hit the wall right in the center of the cord, like a big round target. The end of the alien's limb connected with the wall and stabbed right into the liquid metal-

"Gael, now!" Sam shouted into the intercom. "Magnus, hold on to something!"

A green light appeared at the corner of his HUD and the energy field that kept the hangar safe from the vacuum of space suddenly vanished. Samuel reached out and gripped the inside rim of the nearby doorway and held on as tightly as he could while the atmosphere was instantly and forcefully drained from the chamber.



Suddenly, the field reappeared, and Sam let go of the door, looking up at the Juggernaut.

And he smiled.

His plan had worked perfectly. The creature's tentacle had gone straight into the liquid-metal, and had still been inside when the field disappeared. And, also as expected, the vacuum of space had cooled the metal almost instantly back to a solid state-

And the Juggernaut's tentacle was now effectively stuck inside the wall.

"Magnus!" he shouted, "let's finish this!"

The green light blinked again, and Sam watched as Magnus rushed up behind the enormous creature and put the Shotgun to its back. He fired and the alien lumbered forward, sending its only free tentacle crashing down-

Magnus moved and grabbed the giant limb, holding it as best he could while Samuel moved for the Spartan Laser.

"Hurry, Sam!" he shouted. "One tentacle is still more than enough!"

Sam grabbed the laser and pointed it at the monster's back before preparing to fire. He counted in his head.

\_Oneâ€|twoâ€|\_

"Magnus, move!"

The green-armored Spartan let go and was tossed like a ragdoll into the wall once more, this time landing hard on the second-story ledge.

No sooner had he landed than the Spartan Laser fired and the searing beam of energy cut through the air and carved a clean, circular hole through the Juggernaut's back, going straight through and scorching the metallic wall on the other side.

Samuel sighed as the gigantic alien slumped forward and fell to the ground, dead at last.

"Holy Hell," Magnus said from above Samuel. "Those things suck!"

"No kidding," Sam said, brushing himself off and putting the laser on his back. "Start handing me those bombs, one at a time."

Magnus nodded, and pushed the front end of one over the ledge, holding it just barely within Samuel's reach. The brown-armored Spartan grabbed the spikes and prepped himself for Magnus to let go.

When he did, Samuel was blown away. The Anti-Matter Bomb was insanely heavy, and he couldn't even hold it up at the angle that he was holding it. Samuel, with all his genetically-modified strength, was only able to slow its fall as the explosive hit the floor with a thud.

"Two more," Magnus said, pushing another over the ledge. Samuel scowled.

\* \* \*

><p>Breka breathed hard, triple-checking the remaining security protocols and running through the possible scenarios in his head. It all had to go according to plan, or the Parasite would spread to every nearby world.<p>

And from there, the gods only knew where it would go.

Still, the Sangheili was as prepared as he could possibly be. He knew all the codes to unlock the doors, including the most important one: the door to the tiny chamber that looked in on the generator itself. That small room held the computer system that the two humans would be dealing with.

But that didn't stop Breka from being more than a little nervous. He could hear the Flood gathering outside the two doors that connected the Control Room to the outer halls.

And he knew that he was missing something.

The Parasite, logically, should be amassing every available body to deal with the threat at hand, which was the two Spartans. They had no way to penetrate the Control Room, and Breka had made it abundantly clear that he would not leave if it would jeopardize the mission, so their forces were wasted outside.

A chill permeated the Elite's entire body as a single, terrifying thought entered his mind.

He could be right, and their forces could be wasted outside, stationary and useless in stopping the Spartans and their cause. Or he could be wrong, and the Parasite knew something that he didn't.

\* \* \*

><p>Magnus wondered how long it would take to reach the three UNSC vessels as they left the <em>CCS<em> Battlecruiser. Gael couldn't get an exact location from the details given by the Gravemind, but she guessed that they couldn't be far, by any means.

The giant Spartan sighed as he looked out of the viewing glass at the Covenant starship that he and Samuel had oh-so-narrowly escaped. He thought of the lack of bodies anywhere, the almost effortless run to the bombs, the Juggernaut-

A chill traveled down the length of his spine at the thought. The Juggernaut was something completely new and different. And it was a monstrous creature the likes of which the Flood had never used against the UNSC.

"Wow," Gael said, her voice echoing throughout the craft, "closer than I thought."

Magnus squinted as the Prowler came to the top of the \_CCS\_ and he was able to see behind it. Through the glass, he could make out what

looked like a UNSC space stationâ€|except it was huge. On in, two \_Halcyon\_-class Cruisers were docked â€" one on either side â€" and a single \_Marathon\_-class starship was docked between them, on the far side of the station. A long, narrow strip of titanium extended from the giant structure toward the Prowler, finishing the almost cross-like appearance.

Magnus guessed that the fourth strip was yet another docking point.

"That station's enormous." Samuel said with a hint of awe in his voice.

"No kidding," Gael said. She sounded just as surprised as the two Spartans. "Normally, a station can only hold a pair of small ships, Frigates usually. But this oneâ€|it could hold up to four large battleships. It's astounding."

"Well," Samuel said, "let's get started. Gael, what's the best course?"

"From what I can guess, the two \_Halcyon\_-class ships both have available spots for us to latch the Prowler and get inside. The \_Marathon\_â€|that's another story entirely; we'll have to deal with that one the old-fashioned way."

"Okay." He turned to Magnus. "Comfortable splitting up?"

"You kidding?" Magnus asked. "I've never been a team-player."

"Good," Sam answered. "Then that settles it. Gael," he turned back to the monitor. "Take us to the first \_Halcyon\_ and drop Magnus off. Then take me to the second one and go back and get Magnus."

"Sure," Gael said, "I can-"

"Idea," Magnus said, getting their attention. "We need to keep the Flood away from the bombs. To do that, we should be locking every single door in the ship to slow their progress."

"Only have one AI," Sam said. "We don't have the time."

"Not quite," Magnus said, pointing at his helmet. "I still have the AI that was originally responsible for the Fuel Rods in my arms. The thing's not the brightest bulb in the pack, but it should be right at home in a UNSC Cruiser." He paused. "You should take Gael with you. When you're done, just come back and get me."

Samuel nodded, and Magnus waited on him to think it over. "Alright," he said finally. "Let's do it. Gael: set a course."

"On it," she said, and the Prowler shifted direction, straight for the first \_Halcyon\_-class Cruiser.

"This has to be quick." Sam said. "We don't have but another twenty-eight minutes, so this has to be lightning-fast."

Magnus nodded. "No problem." He said. "I'll be done in thirty seconds. Hell, we're being dropped off at hangars that are less than

thirty meters from the heart of the ship. I'd say we got it pretty good."

"Yeah," Samuel answered. "That we do."

"Connecting to the first bay," Gael said, and Magnus turned toward the entrance of the Prowler as it opened toward one of the windows of the hangar. It connected, but stopped suddenly upon making contact with the glass.

"What now?" Magnus asked.

"This." Samuel walked up the glass and punched a hole in it, then kicked in several places and opened a larger entrance. "We'll wait to leave until you're out of the room. The Cruiser's systems are all but dead, and I doubt it seals the area off."

Magnus nodded, gripped one of the Anti-Matter Bombs, and stepped out, into the Cruiser.

\* \* \*

><p>Nathan led the way down the hall, stopping when he finally reached the blue-lit door at its end. "This is it." He said.<p>

Blaine nodded. "Yeah," he said, sounding skeptical. "But we haven't seen a single one of those things since the last hangar, which means they're waiting en masse on the other side of that door." He paused for a second, then turned around. "Follow me."

Nathan shrugged and ran behind the other Spartan as he sprinted backwards down the corridor and turned left when he came to the first cross-section. The path continued straight, then turned left as well, and sloped upwards.

When they reached the next door, it slid open and revealed the same hangar that they had been mere feet away from a minute before.

The difference was that they were now on the third floor of the hangar, looking down on the chamber.

And Nathan let out a long, slow whistle.

He couldn't even count the number of Flood forms on the floor of the hangar, each and every one looking straight up at the two Spartans. There were Combat Forms, Carrier Forms, Tank Forms, and Ranged Forms stuck on the walls. They covered the vast, overwhelming majority of the floor, and all Nathan could certainly make out in the dim, purple light was a single, glowing red door at the other side of the hangar, on the ground level.

"Wow," Nathan said. "This sucks...I mean, really, really sucks."

Blaine shook his head. "So much for them not having much left in the way of troops. What do you think? I'd say at least two-hundred."

Nathan shrugged, swaying back and forth slightly. "I was gonna go

with three."

"Son of a bitch," Blaine said. "We don't have the firepower for this. There's no wa-"

"Demons!"

The voice was Breka's.

"What is it?"

"The Parasite!" the Elite shouted. "The Parasite is attempting to open the doors to the Control Room! I'm trying to block it manually, but I cannot keep it up! It will surely get inside!"

"How?" Blaine asked. "Demon locked the doors himself."

Nathan squinted, trying to think of a reason. Somehow, the code had to have been compromised. Demon and every other AI he had ever heard of were the best code-breakers and code-makers in existence. The Flood would have had to have had help in figuring out-

"We opened them!" Nathan shouted suddenly, much louder than he had intended. "When we opened the doors to leave, Breka had to put in the code to do it. The Flood are probably in the system, monitoring what commands go in, like monitoring keystrokes on a computer on Earth."

"Then why did they wait so long?"

Nathan shrugged. "Demon's smart." He said. "He probably inserted some kind of false code or firewall to delay their progress. But he didn't have much time. There's no way he would've had the ability to keep them out forever."

"Demons," Breka said, "I cannot hold them off. I am sorry."

"We have to go back." Blaine said, turning around and walking out of the hangar.

Nathan stepped back through the door and put an arm out to stop him. "There's no time. We have to finish this now."

"We can't." Blaine said. "If that door won't open, then we can't get to the generator in the first place. And if they get full control of the ship, they'll jump straight to Earth."

"Then we have two jobs to do." Nathan said. "And we have two Spartans."

Blaine shook his head. "No way. We don't have the firepower to split up. There's no telling how many Combat Forms are waiting back at the Control Room."

"Look!" Nathan said. "I'll go to the Control Room and I'll make sure that the door opens when you need it to."

"You'll never make it." Blaine said. "I'll go with you."

"You can't." The other Spartan persisted. "There's no time."

When Blaine didn't move, he realized finally why the white-armored Spartan was arguing so much.

"You know I won't make it." Nathan said.

Blaine looked away for a moment. "I've lost two allies today to these undead bastards." He said. "I'm not ready to lose another."

Nathan sighed. "We don't have a choice. And you saw the force in that hangar," he pointed loosely at the door. "I'd like to tell you that I'm a Spartan and that I'd wipe the floor with their ugly asses, but the truth is that I would never make it alone. There are just too many of them. But youâ€|you've got a chance."

"You'll die."

"So will you," Nathan said jokingly, "unless you really are as bad as they say you are."

Blaine laughed bitterly. "Trust me," he said, "I'm exactly that." He paused, apparently coming to grips with the realization. "Alright," he said finally, "go. Go help Breka. I'll get to work on the hangar."

"Sounds good," Nathan said. He grabbed the weapon on his back and held it out in front of him. "Take my Shotgun."

"You're gonna need it." Blaine said.

"Not as much as you will," Nathan said. "Just give me the Mauler." He motioned to the small weapon on the other Spartan's thigh.

"You're sure?"

"Positive," the Nova Company Spartan said, trading weapons. "You just give 'em Hell for me."

"Oh, I will." Blaine said, pumping the Shotgun. "Believe me, I will."

Nathan smiled. "It was an honor to get to work with you, and the rest of your team."

"The honor was ours," Blaine answered. "Now go!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Well, at least you can see why I split it up..I hope. Seriously. Picture another chapter that's just as long as this one...right HERE. Yeah. Talk about your long upload times (I have dial-up, people...). lol.<strong>

\*\*Well, enjoy the end of Zulu Company: The Last Stand.\*\*

\*\*BTW: There will be information at the end of the next chapter regarding the Epilogue, the sequel, Hell On Earth, and the possibility of this actually being submitted to Bungie (after MASSIVE improvements on several parts that I would never sign my name to after reading the rest...lol). Now, with that last one...I doubt

anything comes of it, but I've undergone considerable nagging from multiple parties, so I'm caving...maybe.\*\*

\*\*The conditions of this are to be revealed at the end of the next chapter. If you don't CARE if this goes to Bungie (as I imagine many of you don't), then it really shouldn't concern you, lol.\*\*

\*\*Thanks all. :)\*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

## 62. Chapter 61: Spartans Never Die

\*\*Author's Notes: No real notes at the start this time!\*\*

\*\*BUT THERE WILL BE ENDING NOTES THAT I WOULD PLEAD WITH EVERYONE TO READ! THESE INVOLVE THE EPILOGUE, THE SEQUEL, AND OTHER IMPORTANT CONCEPTS (LIKE THE IDEA THAT I MIGHT GIVE IN AND SEND THIS IN FOR BUNGIE'S ENJOYMENT...). PLEASE READ IT. THANK YOU! :)\*\*

\*\*Sorry about the caps...Just needed everyone to read it. lol.\*\*

\*\*NOW, enjoy the end of Zulu Company: The Last Stand!\*\*

\* \* \*

<p><strong>Chapter 61:<strong>

â€" \*\*Spartans Never Die â€" \*\*

\*\*2050 Hours - March 20, 2553\*\*

\*\*Docked UNSC \_Haclyon\_-class Cruiser - Groombridge System\*\*

"That's the door!" Gael said, her voice echoing inside Samuel's mind. He tightened his grip on two of the spikes protruding from the Anti-Matter Bomb and pulled harder, stepping into the room ahead as the door slid open.

It wasn't very impressive. The entire chamber was smaller than the Prowler that he'd entered into the ship from. It was fairly close to the docking clamps on the space station though, and it connected with the engines of the cruiser on one side. The other side connected to a long, narrow chamber filled with Long Range Insertion Pods that Samuel assumed had been provided for the crewâ€|

Not that they had ever gotten a chance to use them once the Flood arrived.

He put his hand on top of the bomb and it began to glow bright red, beeping insistently.

"It'll go off in sync with the first." Gael said. "And Magnus' AI should do the same."

Samuel nodded and prepared to take off, but he stopped when he saw something on the floor. It looked like a Bubble Shield, but it was colored differently, and very slightly different in shape as

well.

He shrugged, picking it up, and took off, back down the hall, past the pods and into the hangar. He quickly put the neuro-chip into a terminal on the wall and every door on the ship slammed shut, locked. Then he pulled it out and put it back into his helmet.

"That's it." Gael said. "Other than that last ship, we're golden."

"Yeah," Sam said, "now let's go get Magnus."

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine took a deep breath, looking down on the hangar before him. He had twenty shots for the Shotgun, six good swings with the Gravity Hammer, two Spike and Plasma Grenades, a Plasma Rifle that he'd taken from the last hangar, and four rockets to use.<p>

It wasn't going to be nearly enough.

"Now," he asked aloud, "how to go about thisâ€|"

He'd actually taken the time to count them by now. There weren't as many as he had originally guessed; the room simply looked larger at a distance.

Still, there were one-hundred-and-four Combat Forms, along with twenty-nine Tank Forms and eleven Carrier Forms scattered around the area. Twenty of the Ranged Forms lined the walls.

Blaine groaned into his helmet. No matter what he thought of, it wasn't going to be enough to kill everything in the room, and it probably wouldn't even be enough to clear a path to the door. Still, four rockets was a considerable numberâ€|

"Okay," he said, exhaling, "time to put these bastards in their place." He primed one of his Plasma Grenades and took aim at a Carrier Form that was trying to shuffle its way through the crowd.

He tossed it and pegged the big, ugly creature with ease, right where its head would have been, if it had had one. The thing spun around for a moment before-

BOOM!

The Carrier Form detonated in a flash of bright, blue plasma, swallowing up every Combat Form in the immediate area. Blaine didn't take the time to count again, but he guessed that at least nine of them had bitten the dust.

"Not bad," he said, pulling out the Plasma Rifle. The battery read '86', so he knew that he had plenty of shots in it. The Spartan took aim at the closest ranged form and opened fire.

Fourteen-points of the battery later, Blaine stepped back from the edge of the overhang as the creature fell off the wall, dead.

"Not nearly enough," he said, stepping back out and firing at the



next Ranged Form in the line.

\* \* \*

><p>"This is it," Gael said, her voice echoing around the Prowler as it touched down at one end of the station, opposite the <em>Marathon<em>-class Cruiser.

Magnus' fists clenched at his sides.

This was it.

"You ready?" Sam asked.

"You bet," Magnus answered. "Let's do this." He walked up to the Prowler's exit and grabbed one side of the bomb they were taking.

"Wait one second," Samuel said. He put his hand over the bomb that they were leaving inside the craft, and it began to glow red and beep incessantly.

Magnus was puzzled. "What are you-?"

"It's set to explode when the rest of them do." Sam said. "This way, if we don't make it back, the Flood don't get to borrow our ship. Also, only Gael or your AI can open the door or deactivate the bomb in time." He grabbed the bomb and slid it into the small chamber in the back of the ship, shutting the door as Gael locked it down.

Magnus nodded. "Sounds good."

"Yep." Samuel walked up and grabbed the other side of the bomb as the door slid open. "Here we go."

They stepped out onto the platform, into space. There was no ceiling or energy field keeping them there. Only their armor served to protect the two Spartans from the cold void surrounding them.

The two walked in sync, holding the bomb between them as they moved toward the \_Marathon\_-class Cruiser.

"How long do we have?"

Samuel took a moment to answer. "Twenty minutes." He said.

Magnus exhaled hard. "Then let's pick up the pace."

"Hey," Samuel said, "if you're up to it, then let's go."

The green-armored Spartan quickened his pace to a full-on run, and Samuel matched him step for step. In less than two minutes, they arrived at one entrance to the Cruiser.

And they had encountered no resistance at all.

"Hey Sam," Magnus said, "did you see anything when you entered the other \_Halcyon\_?"

"No," the other Spartan answered. "I'm guessing you didn't find anything either."

"Nothing," Magnus replied. "There wasn't a single spore or form anywhere that I could find. Though, to be fair, we weren't on board very long."

Samuel nodded beside him as the door to the ship slid open, revealing a pressurization chamber. The two Spartans stepped inside, knowing all-too-well that things were too easy. Magnus had the same feeling that he had had before fighting the Juggernaut.

Something was terribly wrong.

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine sighed, grabbing the now-drained Plasma Rifle by the tip and throwing it at one of the Carrier Forms as hard as he could. Surprisingly, the gun hit it right at its core-<p>

And bounced off, harmlessly.

"Damn it." Blaine said, though he had expected just as much. He'd successfully killed a nine of the Ranged Forms with a combination of the Plasma Rifle and a pair of Spike Grenades.

That still left eleven of the disgusting creatures.

"Now what?" he asked, though to no one in particular. Nathan would be arriving at the Control Room soon, assuming he made it at all, and then all Hell would break loose.

Blaine had to reach the door before then.

He brought the Rocket Launcher up to his shoulder and took aim at a group of Combat Forms bunched around a Carrier. Carefully, he aimedâ€|and fired.

The rocket traveled the distance in two seconds, and hit the ground right between a Combat Form and the Carrier. The blast was enough to destroy a half-dozen of the truly dangerous forms and send the Carrier flying through the air-

To land right in the dead-center of another group of Combat Forms.

The creature exploded, and eight more of them were eliminated.

But still, the room was packed, and the aliens didn't even seem to care that they were loosing their brethren. They only waited, looking up at Blaine with their cold, dead eyes.

Growling into his helmet, he took aim and fired again.

\* \* \*

><p>Nathan rounded the next corner with the Mauler poised for a blast, but still encountered nothing. He was thirty seconds away from the Control Room, and he hadn't seen a single Flood form on the way.<p>

And that could mean only one thing: that the rest of them were all waiting anxiously to have their shot at Breka and the Control Room.

"Demons!" the Elite suddenly roared into the intercom. "The Parasite is almost through! I cannot-" There was a short pause, and then Nathan heard shrieks up ahead. "The Parasite is inside! By the gods!"

The connection was terminated.

"Damn it!" Nathan shouted, readying the Mauler and sprinting for the next corner. He rounded it and saw the open door to the Control Room up ahead.

And he gasped.

There were fifty of them, at least, pouring into the room, and he could hear Breka's shouts as the Sangheili let loose with his Energy Sword and gave the Flood everything he had.

"Hang on, Breka!" Nathan roared. "These bastards haven't won yet!"

"Agreed, Demon," the Elite managed in between swipes. "This war will end here, by our hands!"

\* \* \*

><p>BOOM!<p>

That was it. Another two-dozen Combat Forms and a pair of Carriers fell from the last rocket. That left the Spartan with two more, plus his Gravity Hammer and Shotgun, and one Plasma Grenade.

But there were still so many of them. Blaine didn't dare count for fear that there would be more than the minimum he had guessed already. He brought the Gravity Hammer to bear in front of him.

"This is for you guys," he said, thinking of his fallen teammates and the damage that the Flood had already done, the lives that the Parasite had already taken.

And he jumped.

The white-armored Spartan jumped straight down into the mass of Combat Forms and swung the hammer on impact, destroying the closest creatures and sending many others soaring. But just as many ran to fill their places, all of which immediately began to swing their tentacles and fire whatever small arms they were carrying. Ranged Forms fired into the mix, hitting their own kind indiscriminately as they attempted to hit the Spartan.

But he never stopped.

Blaine ran forward, straight for the door, pushing aside whatever he could, reluctant to use the hammer again except for when he absolutely had to.

A tentacle smashed into his back, and he fell to the floor-

He smashed the hammer's head into the ground, propelling him farther forward and giving him a chance to get back on his feet. Blaine refused to slow down, sending the hammer crashing down again when a group of a dozen Combat Forms stood in his path.

Suddenly, the area around him was consumed, entirely stuffed as every Flood form in the room seemed to charge him at once. The Spartan could barely move his free arm amidst the bodies that were all trying to claw at him with their gruesome appendages. He was hit onceâ€|twiceâ€|a third time, and with his shields gone, he was knocked to the ground as the hammer fell from his hands.

Before he could move, he felt the weight of dozens of the creatures all jumping on him. In seconds, Pure Forms were there too, all smashing their limbs down into the pile of Combat Forms in an effort to squash the Spartan at the bottom. Blaine felt his biomechanical parts weakening as they tore wide gashes, first in his armor, and then in his back.

For a moment, he began to black out. And then he saw them.

He could see their faces. The ones who had already fallen. Victoria. Ezekiel.

Then he saw three more; the faces of those who were still putting their lives on the line to finish the fight. Samuel. Magnus. Nathan.

And then, on the brink of collapse, three more faces showed themselves to him. They were the faces of his allies on Earth: Stephanie. Landon. Jason.

"Not yet," he gasped into his helmet. "I'm notâ€|doneâ€|yetâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p>Nathan fought his way to the main terminal and blasted whatever he could with the Mauler as the Elite, Breka, waged war beside him, trying to block the Flood that were pouring in from the left entrance.<p>

But he knew that it was no use. There were just too many.

"We do not have long, Spartan." The Elite said, and Nathan was slightly shocked to hear him say "Spartan" rather than "Demon".

"Yeah," he answered, shooting another Combat Form at point-blank and then digging the small blade on the bottom of the Mauler into its chest. "I know." He glanced at the terminal behind him in time to see Blaine hit in the back and knocked to the ground. "Oh noâ€|"

Things got worse as over a dozen Combat Forms of all races jumped on top of his body and began pounding him with everything they had. Soon, even the Tank Forms were involved, pounding him from outside the pile.

"Blaine," he said, unable to believe what he was seeing. "No!"

"He fought honorably." The Sangheili said, slicing another attacker into pieces. "He gave his life."

Nathan shook his head. He couldn't believe it. Everything they were doing!

It was all for nothing.

"We have to do something." He said. "We have to--"

He was interrupted as a voice echoed inside his head and, somehow, from every terminal and speaker in the room.

"Not a chance!" the voice shouted, and Nathan recognized it instantly as the one belonging to the Spartan that was being mauled on the monitor.

"How is he doing this?" Breka asked.

Nathan shrugged, dumbfounded. Ezekiel had done it earlier, but he had had the help of an AI.

Blaine's voice interrupted them as he continued. "Do you hear me?" He roared defiantly. "You have no chance!"

At that moment, the pile in the middle of the screen erupted! Combat Forms were thrown to the sides and the Tank Forms were pushed over as Blaine stood up and threw his arms over his head and out to the sides.

"What were you thinking? You thought I was done?" Blaine was shouting now at the top of his lungs as he picked up the Gravity Hammer and threw a former-human aside. "I'm just getting warmed up!"

\* \* \*

><p>With every ounce of force he could muster, Blaine smashed the Gravity Hammer down in front of him, clearing the way for several meters. He had two good swings left, and half a football field between him and the door.<p>

The Spartan got a running start and plowed over a pair of Combat Forms before once again encountering heavy resistance. He leapt forward and slammed the hammer down underneath him, killing every monster nearby and shooting his own body even farther forward.

When he was about to touch down, he sent the hammer crashing down again and got even more airtime, soaring over a Tank Form before finally touching down. He checked the Gravity Hammer.

The battery was completely dead.

And he still had twenty yards to go.

"Alright!" he shouted as the first Combat Form came from his left. "Bring it!" He swung the hammer out and sent the end of the grip crashing into the former-Brute's chest, knocking the alien over before he spun the hammer around and crushed it with the bludgeon's

giant head.

Two more came â€" one from the left, and one from right behind him â€" and Blaine thrust his foot back, kicking straight through one's chest. Even as he did it, he pulled the Shotgun from his thigh with his right hand and pointed it at the other attacker.

BANG!

In seconds, Blaine was engaged in all-out war with every remaining undead creature in the room, and he was barely holding his own. As he fired the Shotgun again and again and swung the hammer madly, he knew that he couldn't keep it up. He needed an opening, just for a second-

\_The Plasma Grenade,\_ he thought suddenly. He'd kept it for a reason, though. The Spartan had kept it in case worse came to worst. It had been a failsafe that each of the Spartans was supposed to keep with them to avoid being caught by the Flood.

But it was his last chance.

He dropped the hammer and primed the grenade, tossing it casually to the ground a few meters in front of him, toward the doorway. Seconds later, it exploded, destroying the closest Combat Forms.

He brought the Rocket Launcher to bear and fired twice toward the doorway. Twin explosions rang out across the chamber as pieces of green, undead flesh flew in all directions-

And he could see the door.

The Spartan dropped the heavy weapon, picked up the hammer, and ran at a dead sprint for the glowing red doorway, praying to God that Nathan would somehow open it for him when the time came.

\* \* \*

><p>"He's gonna make it!" Nathan shouted, holding one hand over the control panel while he used the other arm to keep the three Combat Forms in front of him at bay. They were bashing the shield on his limb, but it was going to hold long enough for what had to be done.<p>

When he saw Blaine reach the doorway, Nathan put his hand down on the spot on the panel that Breka had pointed out to him, and the doorway before the other Spartan slid open. He watched Blaine charge through-

Immediately, he pulled his hand off the controls, and the door slid shut, sealing the Flood outside the generator room.

Nathan smashed his fist into the control panel, disabling it from future use until it was reworked. Then he turned to face the three forms in front of him. He grabbed the Mauler from his thigh and threw his body forward, knocking two the Combat Forms backwards before turning sideways and hitting the third with the Mauler.

At that moment, he watched Breka take a hit in the back from a Tank Form and be knocked to the ground, where he barely managed to stand

back up. His Energy Sword had been knocked from his hands.

Nathan checked his own weapons quickly. He only had a handful of shots left in the Mauler, and the Battle Rifle wasn't going to be of any use at this range, not with so many of them.

And somehow, they were still pouring in from both entrances.

Silently, Nathan made his decision. He grabbed the two Plasma Grenades from his armor and turned to the Elite.

"Breka!" he shouted. "Catch!"

The Sangheili growled lowly, obviously appalled at the idea of a kamikaze attack. "I will die with my honor, Demon!"

Nathan shook his head as he used a shield to knock another Combat Form away from him. "There's no honor in this!" He shouted. "We've done our part! There's no honor in letting the Flood use your body as a tool against your own kind!"

The Elite growled again, but narrowly dodged a strike by the Tank Form and turned to face Nathan. "Fine," he said. "But I will do it myself."

The Spartan watched as the Sangheili grabbed two grenades as well, and they suddenly began to glow bright blue. Nathan primed his own, holding them to his chest as the Combat Forms swarmed around him.

"It has been an honor, Spartan."

Nathan smiled at the statement and echoed Blaine's answer. "The honor has been mine."

And the grenades detonated.

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine tried as hard as he could to stand up, but he found that his legs simply wouldn't move. He was on his hands and knees, panting and working just to stay conscious. He glanced down at his body.<p>

His chest was torn open in half-a-dozen places and bleeding mildly through the biofoam. There was blood that was running down his back from God-only-knew how many wounds. Both his legs were torn open, one in two places, the other in five. His arms weren't bleeding, but the biomechanical parts were suffering.

The visor on his helmet was broken open, so he couldn't use his HUD to check his status. All he knew was that it hurt even to think about moving.

"Come on," he said in between pants. He had to move. He had a job to do. "Come on! Come on! Come on!"

He gripped the sides of the computer and worked himself to a standing position as the Flood outside banged on the door with everything they

had. Blaine smiled, bringing the Shotgun to bear and firing blast after blast into the terminal. It took seven of them, but he finally watched as the giant generator in the viewing glass began to overload and spark in countless places.

Seconds later, it exploded, rocking the entire ship.

"Job done, Sam," he said quietly, smiling.

And finally, after waging a war alone, Blaine Everson collapsed onto the cold, metal floor, unconscious.

\* \* \*

><p>"Must go faster!" Magnus shouted from behind Samuel as the brown-armored Spartan led them down another corridor. He had already inserted Gael into the <em>Marathon</em>-class Cruiser's computers, and she was working to open the doors in front of the two Spartans and close the ones behind them.

The former, however, was working much better than the latter.

"The Flood have invaded the system to a degree," she said, her voice echoing in his helmet. "I'm trying to hold them at bay, but they keep circumventing my protocols."

"Just keep trying." Samuel said, straining to hold his end of the bomb up as he maneuvered around another corner. "How close are they?" He asked Magnus, not willing to risk a glance for himself.

"Too close for my liking," the other Spartan answered.

"Fair enough," Sam said, and pushed through another doorway, into a two-story room. Magnus followed right behind-

The door slid shut.

"Thank God."

"Thank Gael," Magnus said, laughing slightly. "Nice job."

"Wasn't me." The AI answered, sounding puzzled.

"Say what?" Sam asked, puzzled.

Suddenly, Magnus shouted. "Oh shit!"

Samuel looked up and immediately saw the cause of the outburst. A Flood Juggernaut stood at one corner of the room, looking down at them.

"We can't fight it." Samuel said. "We don't have time."

"So what do we do?"

"Leave the bomb here." He focused on Gael. "Plot us an alternate route to get out of here."

"Already am," she said. "It's loading to your Heads-Up-Display. I'll lock every door to this room. The bomb won't leave."



Samuel nodded as Magnus put his hand on the top of the bomb. The blue light suddenly turned red, and the Juggernaut let out a scream as it leapt toward them-

"What the Hell?" Magnus shouted.

Samuel almost joined him.

The alien " despite its size and stature " leapt easily twice the distance that a normal Combat Form would jump, and it landed right in front of the two Spartans.

"Let's go, Gael!"

"Door to your left!" she shouted. "Go!"

Samuel led the way through the little door and " for once " was all too happy to see small, narrow corridors. He saw the path on his HUD and checked the time as the entrance closed behind him, sealing the Juggernaut inside.

Twelve minutes.

"Come on, Magnus! Let's get out of here!" He ran through the passages of the Cruiser as fast as he could, charging through doorways and blasting any of the few Combat Forms foolish enough to stand in his way.

After less than three minutes, Samuel used the neuro-chip to pull Gael from the ship's computers and the two Spartans emerged outside the Cruiser, on the space station.

"Go!" Samuel roared, and took off for the Prowler. Magnus was right beside him as they neared the cross-section-

"Oh, Hell!" Magnus said. "That's a lot of Flood!"

There were hundreds of them, pouring out from the two Halcyon-class Cruisers and running to meet the two Spartans in the cross-section. Samuel knew that they'd cut it close if they could manage to outrun them.

The two Zulu Company Spartans ran a dead-sprint, pushing their genetically-modified bodies to the edge of collapse as they took enormous, crushing strides toward the Prowler. They pushed and pushed-

And they made it beyond the cross-section, just as the first of the wave arrived.

"We did it!" Sam said.

"Not quite!" Magnus answered, pointing at the Prowler.

Samuel scowled. Thirteen of the Tank Forms were standing between them and their way home. The only thing he was thankful for now was that they'd gained a significant bit of ground on the wave behind them. They still had a chance to-

"We won't make it." Magnus said suddenly. "There's no way." Samuel saw the other Spartan's pace slow slightly as he began to pull ahead.

"Magnus, what are you doing?"

"This is as far as I go."

And he stopped.

Samuel skidded to a halt as the Flood gathered at the cross-section grew closer.

"What do you mean? Come on!"

"They're not gonna stop, Samuel!" Magnus shouted. "You need time to get through the Tank Forms. Go!"

Samuel couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I'm not going anywhere! Come on! I'm not kidding; that's an order!"

Magnus shook his head, facing away from the brown-armored Spartan. "Look Sam," he said, "I only wanted one thing: to protect her. I wasn't even back for a full mission before I failed." He paused, and Samuel thought he heard the other Spartan start to cry. "I didn't careâ€¦about anything else. It's over, Sam."

"It's not over!" He argued. "We need your help to deal with the Flood! We need you for the battle ahead!"

"Please," he said pleadingly. "Just let it end here, with me. I failed her." He paused again. "I can't live with that forever."

"You didn't fail anyone." Samuel said hurriedly. He watched as the horde grew ever closer, as their impending doom grew closer. "This wasn't your fault. Now come on!"

"I'm not moving." Magnus answered finally, sternly. "This ends here." He raised his hands, pointing them at the oncoming wave. "Give them all my best."

Samuel shook his head furiously, unable to make a decision. He would never leave a soldier behind. At the same timeâ€¦he had to move now, or they were both going to die.

"Magnus," he said, "I've lost two friends already to these things. Please don't make me lose another."

"You haven't lost two yet." Magnus said happily. "I know Zeke, and that bastard thinks too highly of himself to take his own life." He paused. "Tell him I said that I'm sorry about Victoriaâ€¦that he gave it a good try."

Sam put his hands on his head, exhaling and trying to maintain what little composure he had left. "Sure," he managed at last. "I'll tell him." He worked to control himself. "You take care of yourself. Say hi to Vic for me."

"You got it." Magnus said calmly. "Now get outta here. You got a home to get to."

Samuel nodded, turned around, and refused to look back.

\* \* \*

><p>Magnus took a deep breath, clenching his hands at his sides as he watched the Flood get closer.<p>

This was it.

This was the end.

"I'm sorry, Vic," he said. "I know you wouldn't have wanted this. But I have to feel like I've done something. I have to avenge your death as best I know how."

He put his hands back in front of him, opening them and pointing his palms at the oncoming wave. Thankfully, Magnus had found a Fuel Rod Gun inside the \_Halcyon\_-class Cruiser, and had filled his arms to the brim with the dangerous projectiles.

He had twenty-four shots, all ready and rearing to go.

The Spartan took another deep breath, trying to steel himself even more. He remembered watching Victoria fall to the wave inside the Assault Carrier; watching Ezekiel try and fail to save her—he remembered her face when she was controlled by the Flood.

"You monsters!" he roared at the top of his lungs. "This ends here! You hear me? You will pay for the blood you've spilled." He paused, taking as deep a breath as he could. "Mark my words!"

The first of them came into range, and Magnus opened fire with his twin cannons, firing blast after blast into the oncoming horde. He knew that it wouldn't be enough to kill them all, but it would take out the majority of them, and give Samuel enough time to reach the Prowler.

He fired again and again and again until the green smoke radiating from the front lines was so thick that he could no longer see the Flood, only hear their screams and shrieks as they continued forward.

Two-dozen explosions rang out in all, completely engulfing dozens and dozens of Combat Forms. A green haze had spread the entire width of the platform—

And they kept coming. There were at least a-hundred-and-fifty of them still alive, and they all came straight at Magnus with a single goal: to kill and infect.

"Come and get me!" He shouted, ignoring the pain that still occurred in his arms when he fired excessive amounts of Fuel Rods at once.

He charged into the line and began crushing everything in his reach, killing almost twenty of them before he was finally struck multiple times in the back and forced to his knees.

Magnus tried to reach for the Plasma Grenade on his armor, but was stopped cold as a terrible pain suddenly penetrated his back, and he

fell forward, crashing face-first onto the ground.

\* \* \*

><p>Blaine woke to the sound of the Flood, still outside the door to the generator room, and still working to bash their way inside. He smiled as he sat up, pleasantly surprised at the manageable amount of pain that he was in.<p>

\_Courtesy of the biofoam,\_ he thought.

Then he remembered.

"Nathan!" he shouted into the intercom. "Breka? Nathan? Come on! Somebodyâ€|"

No one answered.

Blaine smashed his fist into the wall as the Flood continued to scream from outside the door.

Suddenly, the screams changed. There were shrieks of pain and the occasional thud as something hit the floor. Then, all was silent.

A moment later, the door slid open.

"What the Hell are you doing?" the Spartan in the doorway asked, Energy Sword activated in his right hand. His left arm was hanging limp at his side. "I never thought that you of all people would just resign yourself to death."

"Not even close," Blaine said, standing up. "I thought you were dead."

"You should know better." Ezekiel answered. "Seriously, as if I got this stubborn just to die at the hands of a few hundred of these freaks." He reared back and kicked the nearest corpse.

Blaine grinned and started laughing-

And then he stopped.

"How the Hell did you open the door?" He asked suddenly, realizing that the other Spartan shouldn't have been able toâ€|especially if the Flood couldn't.

"Um," Zeke said, sounding genuinely annoyed, "the same way I open every other door: with Demon."

Blaine was puzzled. "The neuro-chip," he said, "you crushed it."

"Oh!" the other Spartan said, laughing loudly. "That. That was an empty chip. It was the one that Gael was in before I transferred her to Samuel."

Blaine nodded, understanding. "Not a bad trick," he said.

"I thought so." Ezekiel answered. "Now come on. There are two Seraph fighters in the hangar next to the one the Prowler was in. I had

Demon lock them down."

"Nice," Blaine said. "Wait. What about Nathan and Breka?"

Zeke shook his head. "They didn't make it." He said sadly. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He answered. Deep down, he had already known. "They went down fighting."

The black-armored Spartan nodded. "Yes they did." He paused. "Come on. We've got less than a minute before even those Seraphs won't have enough punch to break the star's gravitational pull themselves."

"Oh shit!" Blaine said. "You think maybe that was something you should have mentioned first?"

Zeke shrugged. "Maybe."

Blaine shook his head and limped over, putting his arm around the other Spartan's shoulders as a stabilizer.

"Why the Hell did you have to go and get your legs injured?" Zeke asked. "I just got my arm tore up...but you, noâ€|you had to go and get something done to really slow you down."

"Shut the Hell up." Blaine said. "And let's get out of here."

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel forced himself to keep running, even as he heard the explosions die down behind him and Magnus start to yell in pain. He leveled the Spartan Laser and fired into one of the Tank Forms, destroying it in mere seconds.<p>

After the gun cooled, he readied it again, charging to-

The twelve remaining Tank Forms suddenly liquefied and began to merge together. Two seconds later, there were three large masses of flesh being morphed and rearranged. Samuel squinted as they began to take shape-

"Oh noâ€|" He said, shaking his head in disbelief as the figures grew taller. "My luck is not that bad."

But it was. From the disgusting masses came three of the giant Juggernaut Forms, all standing directly between him and the Prowler.

Samuel risked a glance behind him. He could no longer see Magnus â€" not even his identification tag in his HUD â€" but the Flood wave was now on the move again, though it was much, much smaller.

Regardless, it would certainly catch up to him before he could defeat the three Juggernauts. And there was no way in God's green Earth that he could fight both forces.

He had to choose.

Making a snap-decision, Samuel turned around and ran straight into

the Flood wave, first firing with the Spartan Laser in a sweeping arc as he approached. Then, he pointed at the right-hand-side of the horde and fired once again, clearing an almost-acceptable path to the \_Halcyon\_-class Cruiser that he'd entered before.

He dropped the now-useless Spartan Laser and brought both Shotguns to bear, pumping them as he reached the front of the horde.

"Get out of my way!" he shouted, firing as fast as he could and swinging his arms madly to kill whatever he missed. Samuel never slowed down either " he charged through the horde, running right over the numerous former-humans that tried to stand in his way.

In what seemed like no time at all, the Shotgun in his right hand was empty, and he dropped it to the ground, pulling the Battle Rifle from his back and firing at point-blank range into the crowd that was swinging at him from every direction.

His shields had long ago faded, and when he could take no more, Samuel finally dropped the Regenerator that he'd picked up inside the \_Halcyon\_. His shields continued to recharge just fast enough to take the brunt of the blows from the surrounding Combat Forms until he was able to prime a pair of Frag Grenades and throw them into the ones between him and the \_Halcyon\_-class Cruiser.

BOOM!

More than a dozen of them were killed, and Samuel took his chance: he pushed his body to run faster than ever and charged through the masses to the cross-section, where he turned to the right and ran straight for the pressurized doorway into the Cruiser.

"Come on," he said, "come on."

The door slid open, and he stepped inside, letting it close behind him. He put Gael into the nearest terminal.

"Let's go."

"You got it." She said, and the door in front of him slipped open. Samuel ran through it and hung a left at the first chance he got. "Samuel," the AI said, "where exactly are you going?"

"Back toward the bomb," he said, "but not all the way." He ran to another doorway, which slid open instantly-

A single Combat Form came screaming toward him, but Samuel, without missing a beat, simply grabbed the disgusting creature by the shoulder and slammed it into the wall beside him, causing its entire body to rupture as he smashed it like an insect. And he continued to run.

Finally, he reached the room he was looking for.

"Ah," Gael said, realizing. "I see now. Long Range Stealth Orbital Insertion Pods. Where are you aiming?"

"Somewhere in space and away from the bombs," Samuel said. "There's not enough power in these things to get me anywhere else. Just activate a beacon, plan the trajectory, and then I'll yank you back

out."

"You got it. Plotting coordinates that are very much not specificâ€¦except for the part about being away from the bombs," she said. "Okay. I'm done."

One of the Insertion Pods popped open and Samuel slid the neuro-chip into the terminal before putting it back in his helmet. Then he inched into the pod, which he determined was clearly made for someone much smaller than himself.

The giant Spartan had barely squeezed in before the cap slid shut, and the pod was suddenly blasted out of the Cruiser.

\* \* \*

><p><em>No! Not me!<em> Magnus tried to move, but found himself a captive inside his own body. He could feel the Infection Form latched onto his spinal cord, but somehow, he knew that the repulsive little creature was still outside his armor.

It hadn't burrowed into him.

Through his own eyes, he watched a door to the \_Marathon\_-class Cruiser slide open, and was vaguely aware of his own movements as his legs carried him down the corridors, completely detached from his own wishes.

\_Let me go!\_ He thought. The Spartan wanted to yell, to scream at the top of his lungs for the Flood to release him and allow him to fight back.

But he couldn't.

He was completely stripped of his free will.

Now he knew what Victoria must have felt like before she died.

His possessed body took him half the length of the ship, now at a calm jog as it rounded a corner and passed through an open doorway. In the next chamber, Magnus could see a dozen computer terminals, and several large, box-like tubes that he recognized immediately.

\_Cryo-tubes,\_ he thought.

His body walked slowly to the closest one, and it slid open without him even touching it. Then he heard the voice again.

"This is not your grave, Spartan â€" for your end has not yet come. You shall awaken in time, and to all your pain be numb."

He tried to fight, tried to refuse, but it was no use. His right arm was suddenly reaching for the back of his head, and it pulled the neuro-chip from his helmet, holding it carefully as he turned away from the tube.

Magnus worked again to make a break for it, to escape, but slowly, carefully, his body crawled into the pod, laying flat against the back-

He felt the Infection Form move to avoid being crushed as his body was put flat against the rear of the tube.

The tube's lid slid shut, and the inside of the pod suddenly began to cool rapidly. Magnus tried to move, but found that " even with the rapidly cooling air " the Flood Infection Form was still working well enough to keep his motor functions from being used.

Magnus could feel himself beginning to lose consciousness already. Between the now-dull pain that the Flood was putting him through and the drugs that were likely being administered in a gaseous form inside the tube, he wasn't going to last much longer. He began to black out-

The Infection Form suddenly popped, and Magnus gasped as a new pain hit his body like lightning. He wanted to move, but it was too late: the drugs and super cold temperatures had already taken their toll on his body.

Magnus Daniels fell into cryo-sleep in a matter of seconds. He wasn't even conscious long enough to feel the Cryo-Chamber be launched from the Cruiser, into open space.

\* \* \*

><p>"Okay," Zeke said, "this one's ready." He stepped out of the first Seraph. "Take off. I'll be right behind you."<p>

Blaine looked at him quizzically. "You sure? You're not gonna pull another stunt with a Firebomb on me, are ya?"

"Hell no," the other Spartan answered. "I've had enough fun for one day. Get in the damned Seraph. I'll be right behind you."

Blaine nodded and stepped into the open hatch at the rear of the Seraph fighter. No sooner had he entered than the entrance slammed shut behind him, sealing him in what felt like an exceedingly small space.

He could hear the metal workings of the craft activating, and a door in front of him seemed to slide open out of nowhere.

"Pressurized," he said aloud, looking around as he stepped into the main room of the fighter.

Without warning, it suddenly began to lift off.

"What the Hell?" he asked, looking around for the source of the movement.

Ezekiel's voice suddenly echoed around the Seraph. "Demon installed a primitive program to follow a set of instructions to get us out of the star's gravitational pull. After that, you get to drive."

"Okay," the white-armored Spartan answered, taking a seat at the front of the vehicle. He watched in silence as the energy field that protected the hangar from the vacuum of space disappeared, and the Seraph suddenly shot forward.



On a monitor that showed what was behind the fighter, Blaine could see Assault Carrier. And, behind it, the star, Groombridge 34, was looming dangerously close.

However, the star slowly grew smaller as the Seraph gained speed, finally getting enough to break its gravitational pull. Blaine was only vaguely aware of it when the fighter escaped into open space and started to slow down.

Zeke's fighter suddenly flew by him on the right side. "This is the part where we go manually." He said.

Blaine nodded, looking at the alien controls. After only a few seconds' worth of tinkering, he ascertained enough to get the craft moving in the right direction.

Directly toward the Covenant \_CCS\_ Battlecruiser and UNSC space station that was visible in the distance.

"Hey guys," this time the voice was Demon's, echoing over the speakers of both fighters. "I just got communication from Gael. Your fearless leader is in a Long Range Orbital Insertion Pod that's been ejected from the station. I've got a lock on the beacon and I'm rerouting us."

"Fair enough," Zeke answered.

"What about me?" Blaine asked.

"The program I created gives me a backdoor to remotely control" the AI paused, apparently searching for words. "I've got control of your Seraph too."

Blaine rolled his eyes. "Fine," he said.

He watched through the glass as his fighter soared through black space, first toward the station, and then turning hard to the left and flying straight ahead. At first, Blaine couldn't see the pod. But, after about thirty seconds, he was able to make out the source of the beacon.

Without any effort on his part, the Seraph suddenly spun around and the rear hatch popped open. Blaine watched through the window as the front of Ezekiel's Seraph grew closer and closer to his, until he thought that-

The front of the other Seraph suddenly hit his own " lightly, but it hit. It began to push his ship backwards through space.

"What the Hell are you doing?"

He heard the hatch at the back of the ship slam shut.

"Well," Demon said, his voice echoing throughout the craft, "I don't know what you're waiting for."

The Spartan scowled as he took his helmet off and walked the few feet to the rear of the Seraph. After a minute, the door to the second chamber slid open, and he saw the small tube that Samuel had barely

managed to fit into.

He couldn't even imagine the calculations that the AI must have been capable of to use one spaceship to push another into an almost-precise position in the depths of space. Though, to be fair, he wasn't sure that he even wanted to.

Blaine didn't even have to open the pod â€” the moment he got close to it, Samuel's arms came forward and he pushed the front of it clean off, destroying the hinges and launching the lid into the ceiling of the Seraph.

"Calm that shit down," Blaine joked, reaching one hand out to help the taller Spartan up as he pulled off the helmet with the other. Samuel took it with a nod and stood as tall as he could in the cramped confines of the small fighter.

"Thanks for the pick-up," Sam said. "That pod doesn't have oxygen, and this suit would only keep me breathing for a few hours. I was counting on someone showing up."

"No problem."

"Where's Nathan?" he asked suddenly, glancing around.

The biomechanical Spartan drew a breath as if to speak, but only shook his head. "M.I.A." He said finally.

"Then he-"

Blaine smiled slightly. "Spartans never die, Sam." He said. Then he frowned as a question entered his mind. "Magnus?"

Samuel sighed. "He's gone. Fought the Flood on-" He stopped, nodded, then finished calmly, "M.I.A."

"I knew," Blaine said, "I knew the moment that she died that he'd go down swinging. That was just his way."

"Yeah," Samuel said. "And Breka?"

Blaine shook his head.

Samuel sighed loudly. Blaine thought he was about to say something else, but then he suddenly looked out the window at the other Seraph. "Who-"

"Who the Hell do you think?" Zeke's voice echoed over the speakers. "Come on! Seriously, I put down a little Pyrosene and you all think I'm toast."

\* \* \*

><p>"It's good to see you back." Samuel said, his voice echoing inside Ezekiel's helmet. The black-armored Spartan sighed.<p>

"Yeah," he said. "You too, Samuel." After a second, he added, "Demon has already sent a distress call to Earth, something about pinging it off satellites around this sector or something. He said we should

have a ride home in less than two hours."

"Sounds good," Samuel answered.

Zeke was about to cut the connection when he started speaking again.

"Magnus told me to tell you," he started. "Umâ€¦he said that he was sorry about Vic, and that you gave it a good try." The other Spartan paused. "He's right. She'd be proud of you."

"Yeah," Ezekiel said sarcastically, "I'm sure."

"You did everything right," Samuel argued. "It just wasn't enough."

Ezekiel scoffed. \_I can think of a few things that were far from right.\_

"Look Zeke," Sam said, "I know you're gonna hate to hear this, but the way things happened kept a lot of people alive. If Victoria hadn't been taken, Gael wouldn't have learned of these ships. Andâ€¦without that, we don't know what kind of casualties we might have had. I hate it. I can't believe what we lost in this battle, but we all have to accept that, no matter what, this was how it had to happen."

Zeke scowled. "Thanks Sam." He said bitterly.

And he cut the connection.

Slowly, he removed his helmet-

And threw it into the wall of the Seraph.

"This wasn't how it had to happen." He said to no one in particular, "not even close." His right fist clenched at his side. "She didn't have to die. That was my mistake, not God's will."

He slammed his right fist into the wall, thinking back to all that had taken place on the Assault Carrier.

The black-armored Spartan had fought and beaten the Flood-controlled Victoria Small handily. And then the Combat Forms came, and he destroyed them with relative ease as well, fighting for something that truly mattered.

He had been fighting for the life of someone he knew, not the faceless lives of "humanity," as they were called.

And then, he had made his true mistake.

It wasn't the one shot that he took at the former-human carrying the Rocket Launcher. No, that wasn't it. Given the stress that he was under, even Zeke could provide himself the slightest bit of leeway.

It was the rifle. Why didn't he fire again? Why didn't he aim at the rocket after the Flood fired it?

It was because he couldn't. He couldn't fire because the moment he pulled the trigger, he had realized that, in his haste to find Victoria, he had neglected to reload the Sniper Rifle after firing it three times at the Combat Forms that had attacked him before he reached the hangar.

It was a rookie mistake—a fool's error that should never have been made.

And it had cost Victoria her life.

Then came the second phase of what he would one day remember as the single worst day in history: vengeance.

To his credit, his plan had worked perfectly. The Gravemind—a near omniscient being with thousands upon thousands of years of knowledge—had fallen for his ruse without the slightest idea of what he was up to. It was something that he would be able to brag about in the future—

If only the circumstances leading up to it had been different.

The Spartan remembered standing in the center of the flames after dropping the Firebomb, staring down the Pure Form that was there to represent the Gravemind. The creature never spoke after that, didn't say a word. And Ezekiel didn't either. He had just stood there, ready to die justified.

But he didn't.

At the last second, he had pulled the glowing, golden device from his armor that Victoria had handed to him the first time they were on the Assault Carrier. And he had activated it. Those shining, silver bands surrounded his armor—even his head, which wasn't covered—and protected him as he walked right out of the fire like some kind of monster himself.

And that hadn't been part of the plan.

Ezekiel Veron had fully intended to die in that room.

"But I didn't!" he shouted, pounding his fist against the wall again, deepening the dent. He was a coward. That was the worst part. Everyone—every single human ever to live—feared death in some way, even if they refused to show it.

But he hadn't feared death itself. Dying wasn't scary. No, that wasn't it at all.

It was worse than that.

Ezekiel had been afraid of not living. He simply couldn't believe that it would all be over.

His life.

Not Victoria's. Not Samuel's or Blaine's or the life of anyone else on Earth.

His life.

For some reason, he just couldn't bring himself to let it end, not when he didn't have to.

And that was the moment that he made the decision to use the Invincibility, to escape the flames and live out the rest of his life. He still had Demon, thanks to the clever deception that had so embittered the Flood from the moment they gathered into the room.

Maybe that proved that he had never intended to die in the first place. Ezekiel didn't know.

After leaving the room, he was immediately made aware of the fact that the Flood had far more troops than he originally believed. He waged war with dozens of them and sustained minimal injuriesâ€|except for taking a pair of Fuel Rods to his left side when his shields were at next to nothing. That had done a major number on his arm, and he was sure that it would need surgery when he returned to Earth.

Still, those two shots had rendered him next-to-useless on the ship, and he was forced to hide in the shadows until either the generator was taken care of or he was forced to try and reach it himself.

In that time, Demon had successfully wreaked havoc inside the Flood-controlled system, setting up false entries, allowing Blaine's voice to resound from every single speaker on the craft, even putting up roadblocks to stop the Flood from manually changing the ship's course before it was too late and it was stuck in the star's gravitational pull.

But, at the end of the day, none of that mattered. What mattered were the losses.

Looking out the window, Ezekiel Veron thought of all the people â€" the teammates, allies, and \*\*friends\*\* â€" they had lost on this one mission. He had known right from the start that things wouldn't be easy, that they wouldn't go off without a hitchâ€|

But he had never imagined that the battle would end this way.

He thought about what Samuel had just said, about how everything had happened as it had to, and that he simply needed to accept it. And he could think of only one response to it all.

"Why?" he shouted at the top of his lungs, looking out the window of the Seraph, into deep space. "Why should I?" He thought of the single Supreme Being that Samuel always referred to, the merciful God that he had heard so much aboutâ€|that, despite the horror that they'd all seen, he still believed in.

But it wasn't the same. He wasn't Samuel. He couldn't just accept that this was all part of some planâ€|that it all had to happen this way. It wasn't fair.

It wasn't right.

"Why should I?" he shouted again, clenching the cross that he had taken from Victoria's body in his right hand. His voice lowered as

his breathing grew fast and shallow and he fell to his hands and knees on the floor. "Why her?" He asked sadly. "Why not me? Why her?"

He gritted his teeth and forced his eyes to stay dry as he clenched his fists and arched his back, looking straight up at the ceiling, much like he had done one the Assault Carrier.

"Tell me why!"

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel checked the time on his HUD as the Seraphs soared farther from the space station and the Covenant <em>CCS<em>.

Forty seconds.

"The fireworks should be starting any minute," he said, glancing over at Blaine, who was still looking intently out the window. When the other Spartan didn't answer, he was puzzled. "What are you thinking?"

"Just waiting," Blaine said calmly. Then, Samuel saw his eyes grow wide. "What is that?" He pointed out the window.

Samuel watched as, at one end of the space station, a small vessel suddenly began to lift off the platform. It hadn't been moving for more than twenty seconds before the space around it began to be distorted.

"That's the Prowler!" Blaine shouted. "They're jumping!"

Samuel looked at the time.

Nine seconds.

"No they're not." He said calmly. He waited as the clock counted down.

Fiveâ€|fourâ€|threeâ€|twoâ€|oneâ€|

Five explosions happened at once â€" three of them on the space station, one in the center of the \_CCS\_, and the last one engulfed the entire UNSC Prowler. Each of the massive detonations hit the major reactors of the ships they originated in, and multiple smaller explosions began to erupt around the edges of the ships-

After two full seconds, the blasts inside the two \_Halcyon\_-class Cruisers and the \_CCS\_ Battlecruiser reached the ships' power sources and the lightshow expanded exponentially. The three ships were suddenly swallowed by the enormous power-

The \_Marathon\_-class Cruiser ruptured suddenly as well, and the detonations grew once again, consuming nearly the entire space station in a great flash of destruction.

A full twenty seconds later, when the blast finally cleared, only ruins remained.

Samuel took a deep breath, surveying the damage and looking for any

possible Flood forms remaining.

He couldn't find any.

"We did it." He said, though he couldn't bring himself to smile. So much had been lost for what now felt like an almost meaningless victory.

"Yeah," Blaine said. "We did it." He shook his head. "I'm gonna lie down until our ride gets here. I've had enough for one day."

Sam nodded. "Sure."

He looked out the window, into the void. It could have been a symbol of everything that he was feeling at that moment: black, empty, cold. His body and his mind had taken all they could handle. Watching Victoria and Magnus fallâ€”hearing of Nathan's death and being able to safely assume the death of the Sangheili, Brekaâ€”it was all just more than he could bring himself to process.

"Samuel," Gael said suddenly, her kind, easy voice echoing inside his mind. "I still have to tell youâ€”about Victoria-

"I know." He said, interrupting her. "Not right now, Gael." Samuel let out a long, painful sigh. "Tell me in a little whileâ€”but not right now."

**\*\*END\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: And so it ends! I do hope that it wasn't a let-down for anyone. It took forever to get it all right and to fix some minor errors on my part...courtesy of a certain proofreader whose name will not be mentioned (again) until later.<strong>

**\*\*Hope everyone else enjoyed this as much as I have.\*\***

**\*\*Several things that I have to say:\*\***

**\*\*(1) Thank you to everyone who has stuck with it through the entire story, thick and thin, you might say (in terms of the plot...I guess, lol). I'll do more with "thank you"s later.\*\***

**\*\*(2) I would appreciate every review that I can get. Seriously, this is the end, except for a fairly short Epilogue. If you've read along the whole time and just haven't felt like dropping me a line, that's fine, I understand entirely. But please, tell me, as a whole, what you thought. The ending, the plot, the characters, the fight-scenes, etc. WHATEVER! Just let me know. The more info I get from people about what they enjoyed or didn't enjoy, the better I can make Hell On Earth!\*\***

**\*\*ALSO, if you have questions, now is the time to ask! I can't guarantee an answer (I'm secretive about my plot, sorry), but I will do the best I can!\*\***

**\*\*I will answer all reviews, just like always, at the start of the Epilogue. Promise.\*\***

\*\*(3) I will have the Epilogue out in the next week or so (I'm on Spring Break now, which is the only reason I had the time needed to finish this ending piece in the (what might not have seemed so) short timespan that I did it in. I've been up 'til about 3:30 or 4:00 am every morning for the last 5 days, trying to do this. I'll likely take a few day hiatus after posting this. That being said, the Epilogue will cover the end of this story and (hopefully) answer any questions you have, AND it will serve as a lead-up to Hell On Earth.\*\*

\*\*AND, perhaps most-importantly, it will include my various credits to all those who gave me VERY MUCH NEEDED assistance in writing this story. I would encourage everyone to read that, even if you don't care...why? Because if you LIKE this story, then you should know that these people are partially responsible and deserve as much acknowledgement as I do.\*\*

\*\*If you really DON'T like this story...how and WHY in God's good name did you read all of this? ;)\*\*

\*\*(4) AFTER the Epilogue, I will be writing a SHORT excerpt from Hell On Earth that I have already had planned, and be posting it on the end of this story (it will be a separate "chapter" though, so don't worry about missing it; if you have the alert, you'll get an e-mail), just as a sample of what is to come. I might take a few extra days, 'cause it's NOT at the very start of the story, and I have to make sure not to spoil anything.\*\*

\*\*Also, for those of you planning to review the Epilogue (which, by all means, go ahead! I'd love that!), I will answer those RIGHT BEFORE THE EXCERPT. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*(5) [ALMOST DONE, PROMISE] I intend to type out the first 4 or 5 chapters of Hell On Earth before I start posting. The reason for this: I have my second exams coming up in college, and I don't want to tie myself to a schedule yet. At this point, and I am NOT saying this to boost my numbers, I SWEAR:\*\*

\*\*GET AN AUTHOR-ALERT IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO KNOW EXACTLY WHEN I START HELL ON EARTH!!! I can't stress that enough. Please; I want readers, I want you guys to enjoy the next story. If you don't know it's up, then it's gonna be kinda hard for me to get any feedback from you, ya know? And how will I know if anyone is reading it? Thank you!\*\*

\*\*(6) I made a bet with 1 way ticket (my girlfriend, for those of you who didn't know) that I wouldn't hit a certain number of reviews. If I DO, I cave and send this in to Bungie. If not...she loses, and I...\*\*

\*\*I really win nothing except the right to say that I won. I need to rethink my bets...\*\*

\*\*Regardless! If you would like to see this submitted, tell me so when you review. The more people I can cite as saying , "yes, they'd like this to be taken seriously," the better my chances. Thank you.\*\*

\*\*(7) LAST ONE. There will be a poll (or 2) that I'm going to add to my Profile soon. I haven't decided exactly what to put up as



questions yet, but I'm considering a poll of everyone's favorite "Fight Scenes" that I guess I've come to associate with my better moments. If you have one and would answer, don't be afraid to say so or PM or e-mail me, if you would like it private for whatever reason.\*\*

\*\*Also, if you have a cool idea for a poll, feel free to mention that as well. No promises, but I'm always open to suggestions.  
:)\*\*

\*\*Wow, sorry for the long speech. Had a LOT to tell you all. Hope to hear from you in reviews, and I hope you've enjoyed Zulu Company: The Last Stand!\*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

### 63. Epilogue

\*\*Epilogue:\*\*

And so it ends.

The Human-Covenant War is finally finished.

The Flood " the greatest force ever to threaten the galaxy " has been stopped.

For two decades, death and destruction have ravaged the Earth and her colonies.

And it's over|

|For now.

\* \* \*

><p>Samuel King, Blaine Everson, and Ezekiel Veron would be picked up by the UNSC <em>Ares</em> about an hour after the destruction of the UNSC space station near Groombridge 34; their return to Earth quick and smooth. The trio would arrive at 2300 hours, March 30, 2553, and be immediately placed in an isolated military hospital on the island of Madagascar, where they remain for the next two weeks.

But first, Samuel is informed of the location and condition of the Spartans that had fought on Earth. A request is issued that a short communication be sent to them detailing the events of the battle in space, and is quickly approved. This message would highlight the deaths of the Sangheili, Breka, and of the Spartans, Nathan Taylor, Magnus Daniels, and Victoria Small|

Though of the last one, Samuel was unsure.

The message ends with a statement of his faith in the rest of his team and in the hope that they would return soon to find Blaine, Zeke, and himself in good health and ready to return to the fight.

After two weeks of recuperation, Ezekiel and Samuel reach full recovery and are permitted to leave the hospital without restriction.

Blaine, on the other hand, would suffer small complications in his biomechanical structure and " while not lethal " will require a slightly longer stay.

The Earth and humanity live in relative peace for the next few weeks, during which no Flood-controlled ships of any kind are sighted or detected in any way, shape, or form.

Even those serving on the Atonement of Reach would begin to believe that the threat had finally been eliminated.

And they would be wrong.

On April 21, 2553, everyone on Earth would be forced to come to grips with the harsh reality that their peace cannot last forever, as the Flood-controlled UNSC Cerberus, a Destroyer, arrives in the system and begins to move toward Earth.

Luckily for those on the planet, however, the Orbital Defense Platforms (by this time running at full capacity) would tear the incoming ship to shreds long before it could reach the planet.

But the warning's purpose is served. With this one ship "this single damaged, corrupted vessel " the Flood's point is made abundantly clear.

They are **\*\*not\*\*** defeated.

The war is **\*\*not\*\*** over.

And now, Earth is their target.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: FIRST of all, I apologize for the Epilogue. Really, I do. Future tense...I HATE. I just wrote 350,000 words of PAST TENSE. To try and switch to this future, "will happen" crap...I suck at it. And you all get to suffer through. That is one of two reasons that it was about 400 words (the other being that...I just didn't have a lot to say).<strong>

**\*\*Now, I'm gonna do Reviews, and, at the bottom of this, more notes. Oh, and a quick side-note:\*\***

**\*\*IMPORTANT:** I lost the bet to my girlfriend (who didn't see that coming?), so I get to at least ATTEMPT to send this in to Bungie. Now...I have not the SLIGHTEST idea where I could do that, so if anyone knows their way around the forums or anything of the sort...or, just has a good idea they'd like to share (I'm really open to anything in this department), I would LOVE to hear it. Thank you all.\*\*

**\*\*REVIEWS:\*\***

**\*\*Samson00:** Hehe, well, you're right. It's over. lol. Finally. Had a lot of work put into it, didn't we? Yikes...Anyway, glad I could keep the Juggernaut scene up to par, and I agree entirely with your idea on Magnus. It's gonna be good. ;) Thanks for reviewing, as always.\*\*

**\*\*Woodzyl4:** Glad you liked it as a whole, and I'd like to just take a second to address what you talking about:

>(1) I'd like to think that I didn't kill off TOO many people, lol.  
;) And I'm sorry it felt rushed...I can assure you it was anything but. I took a lot of time to get these out and proofed.<br>(2) The point about the Seraph, I apologize, is mistaken. The Seraph is actually around 90 feet long. The best place I know to see one is in Halo 2, in either "The Arbiter" or "Oracle" levels. It's the fairly-large craft docked inside the station...the same room where you fight the Heretic leader, Sesa 'Refumee. And it also is, at minimum, a ship that can hold two people (pilot and co-pilot). Granted, I did stretch a little with the pressurized chamber, but there's certainly room for it in there.  
>Regardless, thanks very much for all your input, and I'm glad you enjoyed it!<strong>

**\*\*MrHotShotGolfer:** It's good that you enjoyed the ending so much...I just hope that the Epilogue didn't let you down. I know it really wasn't any good...I just flat suck at future tense...lol. And Magnus will certainly be in the next story, but the rest is secret. Sorry...But thank you for your reviews and your comments. Hope you enjoyed it all.\*\*

**\*\*Eternity Of Night:** lol. The snacks are at home. ;) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*Redflame101:** Yeah...the Juggernaut isn't exactly my idea, but I thought Bungie had a great concept that they just kind of abandoned, so I used it. Good to see it got positive comments, lol. Oh, and don't worry about the "Jade" part...I actually added that in there later BECAUSE of a few reviews, so that was MY bad. lol. As for Magnus: he is now in cryo-sleep and not infected. However, the Flood are the only creatures that know he still exists. That's what you need to keep in mind. ;) Thanks!\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Hey! Thanks for all your support, and I hope you've enjoyed everything. As for the checklist of what happened here:

>(1) On the ground, no one died.<br>(2) In space, we lost Vic, Magnus, Nathan, and Breka...though clearly not all of them are dead. lol.  
>Thanks very much, and I look forward to hearing from you in the future.<strong>

**\*\*Mhop12:** hehehe, good to hear. :) Gotta love more alerts. And, judging by the title, you are 100-percent correct. The Flood are coming for Earth. Good call. ;) Thanks again!\*\*

**\*\*aguynextdoor:** Well, you're getting your wish. Bungie, if I can find a way to send it in, will definitely at least HAVE this to read. And I'm pumped about Zeke too, lol. I couldn't kill him...okay, I could. I chose not to. ;) Thanks for reviewing!\*\*

**\*\*outlaw hunter:** lol, yep...it's over. Glad you enjoyed it so much, haha. And Magnus...yeah...he is most definitely MIA. Thanks for all the compliments, and I hope you enjoy Hell On Earth as much as you did this one!\*\*

**\*\*the-super-saiyan-jedi-again:** Thanks very much for the compliments...lol. Flattery. haha. In regards to your question on

Magnus: because the Infection Form popped, he is NOT infected, but he is in cryo-sleep, and no one knows about him except the Flood. As for the comment on Bungie...no choice. Lost a bet, lol. Really, my big hope was that they'd make a movie (I know it won't happen...but I'm allowed to dream, right?) hehehe. Thanks!\*\*

\*\*FireWolfFred: Glad you liked it. And I apologize for some of the fight-scenes...I've realized, having written this segment, that I need to incorporate a little more imagination with the Flood. It's just very difficult with a race that has no real emotion, and ALWAYS fights in the MOST efficient manner possible. You know? lol. And I'm also glad that the Juggernaut got such positive response. I was a little worried, lol.

>On the second chapter...you had several good questions. None of which I can answer now, but all of which will be answered in the sequel, I promise (two of them fairly early on). As for the comment on submitting it to Bungie...my lack of confidence stems from three things, lol.<br>(1) They are VERY focused on keeping things canon...and pieces of my story are not.

>(2) They already have very talented writers on staff, and however good this is...I am not on par with a couple of their novels (my favorites not to be named).<br>(3) What was three? I can't remember "3". Oh well. It would have enforced my point, I promise!

>But, thank you for all the compliments and<strong>\*\* for your constant support, and enjoy the sequel!\*\*

\*\*Snipess: lol, your first review amused me. The part about being "most reviewed." Well...that was actually the bet I had with my girlfriend. I said I wouldn't top it. She said I would. What can I say? You can't win 'em all (or any...you know, lol). And...wow. I don't know what to say. If I had that much motivational power, maybe I should give up writing and go into public speaking, lol. And, for the record, Martial Arts is a blast! Thank you for all the compliments and support, and I hope you've enjoyed it all.  
:)\*\*

\*\*frewriter37: Hey! Always good to hear from someone new! Thanks for the compliments, and I hope you'll stick around and review for the sequel! ;)\*\*

\*\*V0id Drag0n: Thank you! Very much...lol. And, you got your wish...it's going in, eventually (massive editing, lol).\*\*

\*\*pottervspendragon: Thank you for your reviews and compliments...I really run out of ways to phrase that, lol. Makes me feel far too flattered, haha. I'm happy everyone enjoyed it so much, and I hope that you and everyone will keep reading! Thanks!\*\*

\*\*rebelbullit04: I tell you what...I can't believe it's over. lol. It's been so long! Thank you, as usual, for the compliments and the support...it's good to know that individuals with a real military background and knowledge can read this and say, "yeah, not too bad." ;) As for Zeke...well, I can't kill him off in the first story. Not if I have two more to do, lol. And Magnus? Well...yes, he will make one spectacular force in the sequel, let me promise you that. Thanks again for the reviews, and I hope you'll stick around!

>P.S. - Gael's message will also be revealed fairly early in the sequel (first 8 chapters, at the MOST. Promise.)<strong>

**\*\*0756:** Hey! One of my best critics. ;) (hehehe). Glad to hear that you enjoyed it, despite the flaws ("clip" of ammunition, anyone? haha!). lol. No, but seriously, thanks for your input and also for your offer of reading for me. Most of the time, I've got 4 or 5 people I can turn to...but there have been times when they were ALL unavailable, so I will keep that in mind. :) Thank you again, and enjoy.\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** For you to READ?!?!?! What about for me to WRITE?!?!?! LOL. Yeah...it was long. And the ending? You liked it! Good! lol. I know, I wiped a lot of the team, didn't I? That's okay. Magnus isn't dead. We all know that. He'll be back, lol. And you liked the "sacrifice" scene? Thank the Lord SOMEONE said something substantial about it, lol. As for Zeke? Well...just have to wait and see. Thank you for all the reviews and support! It's good to have loyal readers (of which I was particularly lucky to have MANY...thank you all).\*\*

**\*\*Samus 117:** lol. Well, you're getting your wish...it's going. Assuming...I can figure out...how...Grrrrrrrrr. lol. But no, I'm gonna send it after massive editing and proofing. Thank you for the reviews and the comments...flattering. lol. And I will be working on the Poll here soon. And you brought up a good point on the excerpt to Hell On Earth that I'm going to address at the bottom here, AND next time I post (which will be the excerpt).\*\*

**\*\*KrystalIceKitsune:** You wrote a novel for me to read! lol. No, I actually enjoy long reviews full of input (especially when they're arranged in paragraph-format, as yours were...THANK you). And, I think I'm gonna have to do this paragraph-by-paragraph.

>(1) I agree entirely! The idea that there is ANOTHER group of Spartans is something that is done all the time and not at all original anymore. But I sincerely hoped to make it original and, if I might say so, I think that I did. Thank you for the compliments, and I'm glad that I could shatter your misconceptions, lol.<br>(2) Glad you liked the plot, but no comment on Victoria, lol.

>(3) I understand and agree with what you said about the Flood. Reading back through...there was some of it that I would love to change. But you're right: it's a colossal pain to work with the Flood as an enemy all the time (which is why <span>Hell On Earth</span> will be such a challenge). But I will be working on that, and I hope it's better in the future!

>(4) One of my major editing parts is the beginning of <span>The Last Stand</span>. I have so much that needs changed, edited, and re-done. I know that, compared to the rest, it's going to be a LITTLE boring...but as it is, I can't read it, lol. And I certainly can't sign my name to it! And your comment...I think you meant General Malone? lol. It's okay...I had a LOT of high-ranking, Spartan-hating individuals. I realize that now, lol. But I do agree: everyone (including me) loved to hate him. And Zeke...I can't comment on Zeke too much. He's my favorite too though. It shouldn't show as much as it does...but alas, I suck at subtlety. lol.

>(5) I didn't ALWAYS stick to my deadlines, though I did try. Life gets in the way sometimes, as everyone who tries to hold to a schedule knows, but I had a lot of help keeping the chapters coming...and it mostly came from reviewers. So thank yourself and the rest for that!<br>(6) The Plot...the plot is one thing that I am truly proud of. I can say that, despite the technology and the enemies and the programs being Bungie's (great) creations...the plot is mine and mine alone (with some help in certain parts...lol). As

for Victoria...I'm puzzled at how you could be so sure that she's not dead, but I guess that remains to be seen. It's intriguing, if nothing else. ;) And I'm surprised that only one person commented on the false-chip trick...but I'm glad SOMEONE did. lol.  
>In all, thanks very much for your review, and I hope you enjoy  
<span>Hell On Earth<span>!\*\*

\*\*Bubbles: You're just copying Samson and I way's views! Jerk! ;) lol. You can't tell me what to do! But I lost the bet, so...yeah...I lose regardless. Thanks, and how's that report coming???

\*\*j3ssi3r0ck3r0n: lol! Crying wasn't my intention...but oh well! Whatever works, right? haha. Thanks for the compliments, and I can assure you that I have no intentions of stopping my writing! Too much fun. ;)\*\*

\*\*ikldmrogers: ME? Cruel??? Never. ;) hehehehe. I'm gonna skip the next few sentences of flattering compliments and just say, "Thank you very, very much for that. I don't deserve it all, lol." That being said, glad you liked Breka and Nathan's scene as well. And I agree: Blaine is a beast. I'm surprised Gormanuyai hasn't commented on that yet...  
>Anyway! I apologize about the message...it's not in the Epilogue. But, it is in the sequel, and early on, I promise you. And I'm glad to hear that you, for one, will read the credits! Everyone should! The people listed...you have them to thank as much as (or more than) myself. Thank you for your compliments and support, and I hope you enjoy the sequel!<strong>

\*\*Jd: ...Is this who I think it is???  
>Anyway...thank you...and if you have no idea what I'm talking about...ignore it and assume you're not who I think it is.  
lol.<strong>

\*\*hellhound cerberus: lol! I think I scared a few people with Zeke's "Death Scene." Good to hear though! I was going for that. ;) And I'm glad that people took a liking to Nathan before he died (wouldn't want to sacrifice him with no meaning at all, lol). As for questions:

>(1) Zeke listens to a lot...and you'll hear more of them in the sequel (though some of the same...he has some "default" ones).<br>(2) You will find out Gael's message and what happened to Victoria while at ONI, BOTH during Hell On Earth, and very early on.  
>(3) ONI will play a role in <span>Hell On Earth<span> as well...and it will not be supportive to Zulu Company. I can't guarantee a fight, but I can give you that.  
>(4) The main story? Between this Epilogue, the excerpt, and the Prologue of the sequel, you'll have a decent start. I can't give much here.<br>Thanks again, and enjoy!\*\*

\*\*The Not-So Addict: lol! Everyone's not dying...just the ones I don't need. ;) Just kidding. And I understand the brain-dead-syndrome...I'm a common sufferer of lack-of-sleep. Thanks for your reviews, and enjoy Hell On Earth!\*\*

\*\*johnxane: Hey! Glad you enjoyed it. And I always thought that, to some of the other Spartans (and to anyone else who could see his acts), he would be very much like a god to anyone who could see. :) And you can count on continued sarcasm, rest assured! Thanks!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Alright, so that's the Epilogue and the official end to <span>Zulu Company: The Last Stand<span>. I know...it's terrible. If anyone can point me to an Epilogue-writing tutorial...I might just take you up on that. But, that being said, here's the official statement for now:\*\*

\*\*(1) To restate what I said at the start: I lost the bet. I'm sending this story to Bungie after some MASSIVE reworking and editing. That being said, I have no idea where or who to send it to, and if anyone knows their way around the forums or a good way to do it...I would very much appreciate that.\*\*

\*\*(2) I've decided to re-work the way I'm posting this last part of The Last Stand. Next chapter will be the excerpt from Hell On Earth. Followed by that will be my official "END" and "Special Thanks" section. Yeah...I know, this means that less people will hit the "Thanks" page officially, but I figured that, if you didn't want to read it, my putting it at the bottom of this page would change very little. And, this way, I get to answer any questions you all had about the excerpt (that I choose to answer, of course). Thank you.\*\*

\*\*(3) I want everyone to realize that I EXPECT there to be many questions after this Epilogue. I want that. But I can't answer most of them. Feel free to ask me, and I'll try, but if it's something to be revealed in Hell On Earth, I'll have to give you my default answer (which several reviews probably know all-too-well by now, lol). The Prologue of the sequel will go into much greater detail about the events that take place in the Epilogue (the later ones, that is), so don't worry. I promise not to leave you hanging.\*\*

\*\*(4) Finally, there are several questions from The Last Stand that were never answered. I know that. The biggest one: What happened to Victoria at ONI? The next: What is Gael's message to the Spartans? BOTH of these are to be revealed fairly early on in the sequel. I know, I always tell you "later, later, later..." but I promise, it's for the best. Rest assured, all will be made clear. ;)\*\*

\*\*Thank you all for reading, and I hope you've enjoyed it. It's been a blast on my end. ;)\*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

## 64. Hell On Earth: Preview

\*\*Zulu Company: Hell On Earth\*\*

â€" \*\*Preview â€" \*\*

\*\*Date - Unknown\*\*

\*\*Outside Sydney, Australia - Earth\*\*

"So, that's it, huh?" Blaine's voice was cold and flat as he stood to the left of the other two Spartans, unmoving on the edge of the high ridge that overlooked miles of barren wasteland. In the distance,

however, he could make out the edges of the team's goal, a seemingly-random layout of decaying towers and collapsing walls, surrounding a dome that was more than twelve stories high and stretched for hundreds of meters in diameter.

"Yeah," Samuel answered calmly. "That's it." He paused. "HIGHCOM."

Ezekiel was all business. "How many?" he asked, standing with his arms crossed to Sam's right and looking out over the badlands before them.

Blaine shook his head, now committed to making a rough count of the undead terrors that patrolled the immediate surroundings of what was once Earth's greatest military station. Back then, it had been the site of confidential meetings, black-ops missions, illegal research, and had even played home to some of the greatest evils in the Office of Naval Intelligence.

But that was not the case now. No—this once-grand complex had been corrupted to its core, and now served a far more sinister purpose. None of the Spartans were sure, but Blaine could only think of one place for the Gravemind to call home.

And they were looking at it.

\_At least,\_ he thought, \_the tip of it.\_

"Gotta be a couple thousand," Samuel said, "just outside. Pure Forms mostly, if the thing is smart."

Ezekiel's voice was dry as he answered, "trust me: it is."

"Juggernauts?" Blaine asked.

Sam nodded. "I'm sure. It's what I'd have."

"Unless our friends have a few new tricks up their decomposing sleeves," Zeke growled. "Which, I wouldn't count out."

Now it was Blaine's turn to nod. "It's in there." He said calmly. "The damn thing is in there, and we're gonna put an end to this shit, regardless of what they've got."

"Maybe we'll get lucky," Sam said, "and it'll be just inside the dome." The brown-armored Spartan scoffed even as he said it.

Blaine rolled his eyes at the idea of such luck. In truth, if the Gravemind were anywhere nearby—it was under that giant, city-sized base. It was in the Hive, hiding deep under the ground, out of sight and out of reach.

The white-armored Spartan grinned. "Almost out of reach," he said quietly. "But that's about to change." He gripped the Gravity Hammer from his back and held it out in front of him, testing the balance as he often did when he knew of no other preparations to be made.

This was it. The Flood had caused enough pain for one lifetime.



"Hell," he said, "for a hundred lifetimes." Blaine looked around at the desolate landscape that used to be Australiaâ€|that used to be Earth.

The fist holding the handle of the alien bludgeon clenched unnoticeably to all but the white-armored soldier as he gritted his teeth. This had been his planet, his home. The world that he grew up on, that he had fought so hard to saveâ€|

It was all for nothing.

The Flood had just come in and taken it, stripped it of every ounce of life that had once made it so unique. Now it was as dead as the corpses that they had infectedâ€|just a big, deteriorating rock with a tainted atmosphere and a toxic water supply.

Blaine scowled. It was payback time. The time for running, hiding, working to survive...that had all passed. No, this was something elseâ€|.something more.

This was the time for revenge.

\* \* \*

><p>Ezekiel scowled, uncrossing his arms and watching his white-armored teammate grip the enormous Gravity Hammer. He knew too well that Blaine's goal in this trip was different than his own or even Samuel's. His ally, while loyal to the leading Spartan and perfectly content to follow his orders, wasn't doing this for the good of humanity.<p>

He was doing it to kill. He wanted to crush the Flood, then watch and laugh as every one of their God-forsaken species burned alive.

And Ezekiel couldn't blame him. It was a natural reaction.

Hell, it had been his first reaction aboard the Assault Carrier, and he had done a fair job of it himself. But, as he knew, things were different now.

The time for vengeance had passed.

He had something else that demanded his complete, undivided attention, and he wouldn't stop until the job was done.

\_The Flood have crossed me one-too-many times,\_ he thought with clenched fists, searching the area in vain for any sign, any clue to where the dropship might have gone. But, as he expected, there was no such symbol to be found in the wretched Hell that the members of Zulu Company had found themselves in.

The black-armored Spartan didn't have the slightest idea where he was going to go when Samuel finally gave the word. He only hoped that, between Demon's knowledge of the facility and Gael's electronic lock on the Flood-controlled ship, he could follow the damned thing to its hole and fight his way in.

Of course, even if he could, that still left so much to be accounted for. How many would they have in there? Was he good enough to take on

the Juggernauts that he knew would show up? How would he escape if he did manage to track the ship down?

And, obviously, his greatest question of all: was it all for nothing? Was there still a chance that it could actually matter?

Ezekiel took a deep breath.

It had to matter.

It just had to.

No matter what Samuel told him, he **\*\*had\*\*** killed aboard the Assault Carrier. It was his fault, and nothing could change that. And he felt as if he had died a thousand deaths after thatâ€¦

It had to matter.

It had to mean something.

\_We make our own choices,\_ he thought, glancing up at the sky, which had long-since turned a sickening mix of green and brown gasses. \_We can't change them. We can't fix what's done.\_ His thoughts wandered back to the Assault Carrier, but he forced them out. The only question that mattered now was whether or not an act, once finished and held against him forever could in some way be alleviatedâ€¦could be mitigated in any way, shape, or form.

"When we go," Zeke said suddenly, focusing on Samuel, "you need to knowâ€¦I won't be going in with you."

"I know." He said coolly, not moving.

"If I make it," Ezekiel added, "I'll catch up as fast as I can."

Sam said nothing.

"I have to do this." He said, looking for a reactionâ€¦for any reaction at all.

The taller Spartan nodded. "I know." He repeated.

Ezekiel took another breath, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides, ready to activate the white-hot blades at a split-second's notice. He forced himself to focus, to steel his mind and body for the task ahead.

"This is it," he said quietly, smiling to himself as he thought of the two Spartans beside him. One was fighting under another's orders, sureâ€¦but he was still a great soldier, a force the likes of which the galaxy would be lucky to see again in a thousand years.

Ezekiel could appreciate that. The black-armored Spartan was a warrior first, soldier second. He'd proven to ONI in recent months that he was nobody's dog and nobody's puppetâ€¦and most importantly: that he was nobody's fool.

Samuel was the sameâ€¦only better. He was like Stephanie. The only difference was that, while Stephanie was fighting for each individual life, for every man, woman and childâ€¦Samuel was fighting for

something more. He fought for humanity as a wholeâ€|that faceless "humanity" that all the Spartans were told that they served.

Zeke, for one, had never been able to fully reconcile the idea that he was protecting a great wealth of individuals, the faces of which he would never know or even really care about. But Samuel could.

The giant, brown-armored Spartan did it in the name of faith, and he was good at it.

Ezekiel, on the other handâ€|he had other things to fight for. And of all the things that he had imagined could lie in his future, Heaven had never been one of them.

Randomly, he remembered the Colonel's few, choice words from only several hours before.

"Go to Hell."

And, few as they were, they had left an impression. Zeke smiled again, repeating his answer in his mind. \_Been there,\_ he thought, looking out at the complex again, slowing his breathing to a lower-than-average rate as he dispassionately recalled the events of the last couple of months. \_I've been thereâ€|and I'm never going back.\_

He knew perfectly: if there was one thing he had time for anymore, it wasn't humanity. It wasn't vengeance. It wasn't life or justice or even his own pride. None of those would be enough to save him from a miserable, doomed existence once this mission was over. This was his last chance. It was his opportunity to make things rightâ€|to settle the score.

It was redemption.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Where are they?<em> Samuel wondered, almost risking a glance behind him to check the horizon for himself. The rest of the group should have arrived by now, giving the three of them the go-ahead signal.

Still, the brown-armored soldier merely shrugged. They'd arrive in time. The Flood had no idea the attack that was comingâ€|none whatsoever.

Now, that wasn't to say that they didn't know some attack was formingâ€|Ezekiel had made that abundantly clear. Though, to be fair, it was no secret that the Spartans would come, even if he hadn't all but lost his mind at the base.

The Flood couldn't have expected to swoop in with a dropship and then depart without consequences. No, even their Gravemind wasn't that arrogant. It had to know that they would chase the ship back to Australia, back to its lair.

"She's late." Zeke said bitterly, crossing his arms again.

"They're just getting everything together." Samuel answered. "Give her some time."

"We don't have time, Samuel."

The giant Spartan sighed. "Settle." He said sternly. "She'll be here shortly."

As if on cue, a female's voice echoed in the Spartans' helmets.

It was Stephanie's. "I'm on the way." She said calmly. "The Phantom's set up for extraction too." She paused. "Cargo's packed. Ready when you are."

"Good." He said. "Tell me when you're close."

"Yep," she answered, and the connection was terminated.

"You guys ready?" Samuel asked, trying to gauge exactly what the other two soldiers were thinking.

Much to his dismay, the Spartans on either side of him only nodded.

But a moment later, Ezekiel spoke. "If I'm going to meet you," he said, "you'll know about it in the next thirty minutes, at the most." He paused. "If you don't hear from me by thenâ€¦well, you'll know the result."

The brown-armored soldier scowled. "That won't happen." He said. "You'll be fine. Just remember: Landon's on call the moment you need pick-up."

"I won't be the one needing pick-up." He snapped.

"What are you gonna do about the Juggernauts?" Blaine asked before anyone could speak again.

Sam heard the black-armored Spartan growl inside his helmet. "The same thing I always do: kill 'em all."

"And if there are too many?" There was a hint of amusement in Blaine's voice, as though he regarded the question more as a challenge than an expression of actual concern.

Even so, Zeke's answer was short, simple, and cold. "There won't be."

Samuel gave up on asking any more questions. There was no point in talking about any of it at this point.

"I'm approaching you now." Stephanie's voice was back again. "You guys ready to rumble?"

Samuel nodded. "Yeah."

No one else spoke.

"Hey!" Stephanie yelled. "Where are Zeke and Blaine?"

"We're right here." Blaine's voice was ice-cold and sounded more than slightly annoyed.

"Fine," she said, obviously put-out. "I was just trying to ease the nerves a little bit." She paused. "Aren't you guys even a little worried?"

Ezekiel scoffed. "Blaine, how'd that old quote go again?"

Blaine didn't answer, and Samuel was puzzled. "Say what?"

Zeke just stood there, completely still. "Oh yeah," he said finally. "Though I walk through the valley of shadows, I will fear no evilâ€|"

Blaine let out a short laugh of his own. Then he finished, "for I am the meanest son of a bitch in the whole damn valley!" He spun the Gravity Hammer easily in his hand.

Samuel shook his head, a ghost of smile on his face. "Amen," he said.

"Fair enough," Stephanie said over the intercom. "ETA: thirty seconds."

Samuel subconsciously gripped the handles of the two Shotguns on his thighs. This was it. Everything was riding on this last mission. Humanity and every ounce of life in the galaxy rested on their shoulders.

Surprisingly, it was more of a comfort than anything else. The Spartans â€" all of them â€" had grown accustomed to being plunged into battles that, by all rights, should never have been won. Los Angeles was a prime example of a battle in which numbers alone should have meant their doom.

But fate, apparently, had had other plans. Somehow â€" through some kind of miracle â€" they had narrowly escaped. And the force located in the once-great city?

Completely and utterly decimated.

Samuel's smile widened. This was what they lived for: a challenge the likes of which seemed unfathomable, with a chance of victory that was all but nonexistent.

The Pelican's engines in the distance behind them pulled Samuel from his thoughts. "Ready?" he asked.

Blaine spun the Gravity Hammer once more before letting it lean back, resting it over his right shoulder. "Damn right."

Zeke's arms uncrossed as he clenched his fists and held them at his sides. Two glistening Energy Swords erupted from his hands. "Alright," he growled, "let's do it!"

"We're ready to go, Steph," Samuel said. "Now let's put an end to this, once and for all!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Notes: Yeah, I know...it took forever. My bad.

Exams and papers, for the record...NOT my biggest fans. That being said, I'm going to do the Review Responses and give you guys the update on what's going on.<strong>

**\*\*REVIEWS:\*\***

**\*\*MrHotShotGolfer:** Yeah...you were right. The Epilogue, as someone else stated, is so much like a debriefing that I almost didn't want to send it to everyone, lol. It's...well, a little dry, at best. I'll work to keep everyone updated on any submission I do, but rest assured: there's a lot of editing to be done first. And I have to prioritize: do I go back and work on The Last Stand, or really crack down on Hell On Earth? Only so much time in a day, lol. Thank you!\*\*

**\*\*killerman83ca:** Gracias for the ship-specs and such. Sounds like perhaps you use the same site I use when I don't have the books handy. Also, it is my sincere hope that no reviewers (save for one in particular...SAM!!!) have to be called on. After all, it makes it hard to surprise you all that way, lol. But, all the same, thank you for the offer, and enjoy what is to come!\*\*

**\*\*Snipess:** hahaha! Yeah, I watched the fight-scene from Halo Wars (courtesy of Samson), and I have to say it: we watched the whole thing going, "wow...this looks...like my book would look like on film!" lol. As for introducing you to music...your welcome? lol. Wasn't my intention, but I enjoy them, and you'll be sure to see more in the future. Thanks for all your input, and enjoy the future of Zulu!\*\*

**\*\*Taylor114:** lol, thanks for the pep. :) I really didn't like the Epilogue, just because of the future tense and how I thought it could've been so much better written another way. But, as long as it served its purpose, I'm okay with it. I'm glad you've enjoyed it all. I just hope that Hell On Earth keeps pace with what The Last Stand set. Thank you, and enjoy!\*\*

**\*\*FireWolfFred:** Well, to be honest, I planned for Hell On Earth before I realized how hard it was to write many Flood-based fights. The truth is, however, that I've got enough new stuff planned for the sequel that, if I do my job, it won't be boring at all. And, as usual...that is my genuine hope. But, be sure to let me know if I screw it up. ;) Thanks again for all your support!\*\*

**\*\*the-super-saiyan-jedi-again:** lol, glad you liked the Epilogue (just 'cause I didn't, hehehe). And you should have told me that you thought about doing a Machinima with Zulu! I would have said "yes" in a heartbeat, just to see it! Seriously, if you think you can do it (or know someone who can), let me know! Really. I would love that, and I think most anyone here would like to see it too.\*\*

**\*\*Sirkillalot23:** Wow...that's a lot of reading, lol. I'm glad you were able to sit and read for that long (that kind of dedication is the best compliment I can get on a story like this, you know?). Also, to answer: they were never at the memorial, as it first occurred during the time they were at the Birmingham Base (a week before the chapter "Peace"), and a couple of them were still recovering. Regardless, thank you for your review and I hope you'll stick

around!\*\*

\*\*Barca: I almost typed your name as Lecter42 anyway, lol. Sorry about your issues with the login...somehow it doesn't surprise me though that you didn't get much help from the support desk. I checked on the typo and I think I found the issue and corrected it. As far as Magnus and Vic go: well, I can't give any details on the future, but rest assured everything is for the best. And I hope you like it no matter what I do with it.

>Also, on the note about Bungie: I completely agree with you! Trust me...most of what you said (about them publishing my work under their name, etc) were the exact same arguments I made against sending it in. But, I lost a bet and, to be fair, I have nothing to LOSE by sending it (save for a piece of my ego...which is probably large enough anyway...so I'm told), so...well, it goes in, eventually.<br>But I will take into account what you said about including more characters or perspectives, and I hope you'll tell me what you thought of it when I do. As for the sequel, know that I have a lot planned and plenty of tricks to keep it running smoothly and up to par with what's been done so far.

>Thanks for all your support and I hope you enjoy the sequel.  
:)<strong>

\*\*Suliac Griffin: Who said I'd have ten characters? ;) Seriously, you underestimate me. lol. First of all, thank you for the many compliments. The characters, the scenes...I've had a lot of help along the way, so I won't take too much of the credit. But it is nice to know that this story was so well-taken amongst the readers on FanFiction. lol, I've never read a romance, so I'll have to take your word on the 2D characters...if that's the case though, thank you much!

>Now, for the concerns (I have no qualms with an honest review): I understand entirely what you're saying about the authority figures that were included in The Last Stand. Honestly, if and when this does go somewhere, that will be one of the few MAJOR pieces of editing done. They weren't fleshed out or specifically addressed as real people because I didn't know how far this story would go. But, now, I realize just what needs to change.<br>And, on another note: lucky for me...you won't see many of them in Hell On Earth (oh no! Spoilers? Nah.).

>Also, on note of Bungie: I've never really entertained the idea of them actually approving of this story as part of their canon world. It's just too much. Most of it doesn't CONFLICT with canon (minus a couple of parts), but it's all unaddressed within their universe, and it would have a slim chance at acceptance, at best. But, still, what does it hurt to send it in for kicks, right? ;)<br>Thank you for your reviews and your continuous input. I hope you like what's to come!\*\*

\*\*armoured-blade: This is the longest review in the history of the world and I hope you die. LOL. Just kidding! Just kidding! No, really...this is gonna take up some space though.

>(1) Of course I brought Zeke back! If I had 2 books to write, do you think I'd leave him dead? ;)<br>(2) HAVOKs are large bombs with a (I believe) 30-megaton yield, but they were dropped on the outskirts of the city so that they would get whatever infestation had escaped the city's center and overlap to deal with the entire area.

>(3) I would have done more with the vehicles, but it's hard to incorporate them into a burning city with Flood all over the place. Also, they're less effective for holding a position than they are for

movement...so expect more in the sequel. ;) <br>(4) I have some backstory in the works for Nova. Just give me some time to get it worked out. Promise, it'll be worth the wait when I "humanize" them, lol.

>(5) This fight scene you want between Zulu and Nova...I don't know...might be a while in the making. ;) <br>(6) The kid and his mom...no comment. Strange things happen when killer spores turn people into undead terrors and try to conquer the world. lol

>(7) Blaine...to put it simply...is a beast. There's no getting around it. Zeke's just evil. Sam and Magnus are like tanks. But Blaine? Well...he's the unstoppable force that every good super-team needs. <br>(8) Nathan...ah Nathan...I didn't want to kill him, but as you said, it had to happen as it did. The plot works the way I had it planned. Also, he and Breka didn't have the grenades with any intention of killing multiple Flood, but only of saving their bodies from possession. That's why they don't charge the Flood...only stand and wait for the explosion (that and the Flood are crowding around them anyway). Also, YES the biomass from their bodies can be used, but a little piece of mass is much less useful to the Flood than the body of a genetically-altered killing machine or an alien Elite.

>(9) lol, I should tell you: Zeke's not quite that bad. When he clears the room adjacent to the one Blaine is in, there aren't quite so many Flood as when our white-armored friend first came through. And he had his helmet but threw it inside the Seraph (he'll have another later, obviously, lol). As for Magnus...well, you'll just have to wait and see. <br>...oh yeah, and he DOES hate Fuel Rods. ;)

>(10) The equipment Samuel had was a Regenerator, yes. I like to leave stuff out and let people try and figure it out based on my (usually crappy) visual descriptions. I apologize for the uselessness of those descriptions, lol. And he only had 2 shots left when the three Juggernauts formed (he had 3, but killed a Tank Form with one before he knew that they could meld and make Juggernauts). That's why he went back; he could never have made it onto the Prowler before the Flood caught up with him, especially with a Juggernaut standing in the way. <br>(11) Magnus...yeah, he's gone again, much to the dismay of many, I'm sure. But, as I think I implied, he'll be back. Good or bad, he will return someday. Just wait and see...

>(12) The Epilogue: I apologize. I wasn't a big fan either, lol. But, to answer your question: most of what was addressed will be addressed again through the Prologue of the next book and various flashbacks (something new I'm going to try out occasionally). And I promised you more Covie action would take place. Rest assured, I will make good on it. Also: the Gravemind...well, I've got an explanation for that too. <br>(13) No comment on Vic. Whether or not she comes back has yet to be seen (and, if she does, in what capacity?). I will, however, tell you this: Gael's message will answer several questions that have been around long before the scene on the Assault Carrier.

>(14) AAAHH! So...much...typing. ;) Thanks for the review and the seriously questions and comments. I hope you enjoy the sequel, and that the Preview sparked your interest just a little bit! Thank you again! <strong>

**\*\*ALRIGHT! DONE! lol\*\***

**\*\*Wow...well, first of all, I hope that the Preview sparked everyone's interests a little bit for the sequel. I've already started work on it (the Prologue is done and the first 3 chapters underway), and I hope to post it around the time school ends (another**



month, roughly). It MIGHT get out before that, though, so keep an eye on your inbox.\*\*

\*\*Now: any questions that you all have that stem from this I (most likely) can't answer, but go ahead and ask anyway. I will post the Special Thanks section ONE WEEK from today (assuming nothing terrible occurs), and answer any questions that I can.\*\*

\*\*On that note, if you have any questions whatsoever (plot details, character inspirations, stuff that I can clear up, really...whatever you want), this is my last chance to answer them. I don't care what it is; if you want to know an answer, now is the time to ask. One week from now, I'll answer whatever I can.\*\*

\*\*That will be the official, definite end to Zulu Company: The Last Stand. \*\*

\*\*Thank you to everyone who has read through this and enjoyed it as much as I have. I hope you'll all read one last time to see the "Thank You" section that everyone I include so very much deserves. They've had a TREMENDOUS part in this, and it wouldn't be half the story it is without the help I received.\*\*

\*\*So, everyone: enjoy Easter, and I'll see you all in a week for one last post before this story hits the archives. :)\*\*

\*\* - Raptor \*\*

## 65. Ending Credits

\*\*Ending Credits:\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Okay, I'm doing reviews first, but I want everyone to know ahead of time that they will be short and to-the-point, as I'm kind of rushing the responses (I'm really sorry...homework takes priority) in order to get them out before I go to bed tonight. Seven in the morning is going to come a little early for my liking as it is...<strong>

\*\*REVIEWS:\*\*

\*\*The Not-So Addict: \*\*lol, no, I haven't sent it in yet. There's a lot of editing to be done first. As for your comment on Zeke and Blaine...to each their own, lol. I know that, if I had to pick one to send into a situation and take on hordes of enemies...it'd be Blaine. That's just me though. And as for my killing too many Spartans...well, just trust me: I've got plenty for my purposes. And to answer your question: the Elites are not "gone", per se. The Elites from Halo 3 have departed for their homeworld, Sangheilius. The only ones that I'm saying were wiped out were all of them that were on the Assault Carrier. And, just to clarify: those do not include Ahrmonro, U'svere, the Arbiter, Half-Jaw, or any of the other main characters besides Breka. Thanks!

\*\*killerman83ca:\*\* lol, glad you enjoyed it, if a little much. I'll be sure to check out \*\*End of the War\*\* as soon as I get a chance, but give me a bit: school's kinda killin' me right now, lol. Got four

weeks left, and then I'm home free. And as for your comments on the sequel: I'll probably do something very similar to that. Thank you!

**\*\*Taylor114:\*\*** I'm glad it managed to prick your interest. Hopefully the book itself can maintain it. Thanks for all your input!

**\*\*Snipess:\*\*** Good to hear that you liked the excerpt. As for your question about cities: funny you should mention London and New York...those are actually specifically mentioned in the sequel very early on...though I'll let you read that when the time comes. But yes, they will have some more experience in the cities, of that you can be sure. Finally, in answer to your question about Zeke and the "Leave Out All the Rest" song...it's not really what I pictured him looking like, but that's part of the "book" feeling. You get to decide for yourself. I could show you a picture of the person he's based on, but it might ruin the notion for you. ;)

**\*\*Mhop12:\*\*** LOL! Don't worry...I won't be playing much Halo now...my LIVE card expires tomorrow (actually...today now...grrrr). So yeah...depressing.

**\*\*armoured-blade:\*\*** Yep, we've talked, lol. I'll remember the bit about the Bungie update. Who knows? This story might get a cool mention yet. ;) Thanks!

**\*\*FireWolfFred:\*\*** lol, glad to know that you're interested now. ;) And yeah, I love his idea too. I haven't heard from him since then though...so I don't know. Oh yeah, and I love the idea of a "grand celebration" for the sequel, lol, but you should know: I'm a college kid. I can't afford cake...or even cookies. ;) lol. Thanks for your review!

**\*\*j3ssi3r0ck3r0n:\*\*** haha. Yeah, curse papers, and really curse exams! Hope you enjoy the sequel!

**\*\*ikldmrogers:\*\*** Yeah, I can tell you: one of the greatest appeals to a story like **\*\*Hell On Earth\*\*** is that no one does it. No one dares to. To take the world that the Master Chief and the UNSC fought so hard to protect and turn it into a razed Hell is something that you don't see every day. I just hope I can pull it off. ;) And don't worry about the Epilogue...I wasn't fond of it either...at all. And don't worry about Zeke: as long as I had not one, but TWO books left to write, I couldn't do it without him. Finally, in answer to your question: that chapter takes place a few months after **\*\*The Last Stand\*\***, in July of 2553. Thanks for all your support!

**\*\*Sirkillalot23:\*\*** hehehe...you might be right. ;) No promises though.

**\*\*Samus117:\*\*** Glad you enjoyed the excerpt and the Epilogue (as much as is possible given its crappy writing style...grrrr). As for the sequel: there will be some rolled heads, though I can't give you much except to tell you that they are ONI. Also, gracias on the info on Bungie, and I will look into **\*\*BHI\*\*** as soon as I get a chance. I've been a little swamped lately. I should get to both that story and the one suggested by **\*\*killerman83ca\*\*** by Thursday evening. Thanks!

**\*\*Drake Hellion:\*\*** Wow, I feel bad. While I'm wrapping everything up, you're just starting to read through. I apologize in advance for the early chapters...you'll notice that my writing style and my...I don't know, "skill" changes slightly as I go along. If you've enjoyed the start, you should really enjoy it once you get farther in.

**\*\*MrHotShotGolfer:\*\*** hehehe, glad you liked the preview. Hopefully the sequel lives up to the standard it set. And yes, you'll get (hopefully all) your questions answered in the sequel, and many of them will come quickly (including Gael's message). Thanks for your reviews and your input, and I look forward to reading more of them later on! Enjoy the sequel!

**\*\*ching965:\*\*** lol, thank you. And yes, I've actually lost a bet that makes me submit this to Bungie for publication, lol, though I doubt anything comes of it. Still, it's a dream, right? Thanks for the compliments, and I hope you like the sequel just as much!

Thanks to everyone who reviewed, and I'll see you all in **\*\*Hell On Earth\*\***!

\* \* \*

><p><strong>ACTUAL CREDITS:<strong>

And so, it ends. Finally, after roughly 20 months, better than a year and a half, **\*\*Zulu Company: The Last Stand\*\*** sees its final, ending chapter. For anyone who has read this the entire way through, and is still suffering through my rambling to this day, thank you for your attention and, in many cases, your support.

When I first posted the beginnings of this story of FanFiction, I never imagined for a second that I would end up finishing a story with well over 300,000 words, totaling 764 pages in the Internet Explorer's Print Preview (and that's without this last bit, lol). I had an idea and a girlfriend who was exceedingly adamant that I should do something more with it than write it for myself (which would have ended with the first few chapters being recorded and the rest of it doomed to the recesses of memory).

After getting several of the obligatory "introduction" chapters done and successfully introducing most of the characters that would become Zulu Company, I got to take these Spartans â€" my Spartans â€" and plunge them into their first challenges. They went to Phoenix, both as a test for them and as one for me, to see if I could pull off a Spartan VS Covenant fight scene with any real flair.

Turns out, I can, most of the time.

Since that day in Phoenix, Zulu Company has moved all over the map; to Los Angeles and a near-death encounter to save the world from its own great weapons: the NOVA-class Nuclear Warheads. To Argentina, where they were introduced to Earth's newest, greatest warship: the Atonement of Reach. And then they were pushed even farther, into the cold, harsh void of space, where I finally got to put them up against the galaxy's greatest enemy: the Flood.

It's been a great, long ride.

And, with that ride coming to a close, there's a massive amount of credit due to a lot of people other than myself. And when I say "massive", I mean freakin' enormous, like in such a way that not posting it would likely result in my immediate burst into flames from the severity of such an injustice.

Oh, and for the record: these are in no particular order. They are in whatever order that my tired, useless brain decided to give them to me in.

**\*\*1 way ticket - \*\***Obviously the first person on the list, the girl who decided to make it her mission to get me to post the beginnings of a story that I doubt she fully understood even the background to and knew full-well that it wasn't her type of reading. My girlfriend of almost two-and-a-half years, she's still putting up with me today when I get to come home from college and bother her for a weekend. I love her dearly and any of you who enjoyed this story can thank her for the ability to read it. Without her, it'd be a series of forgotten scenes lost in the dark void that is my empty head after a college exam. So thank you, Denalz, for choosing that time to start nagging me. :) More than that, she's occasionally proofread for me and I've bounced more than a few ideas off her head (during which time she was kind enough to work to understand my incoherent rambling about new Spartans, implanted weapons, infected soldiers, big explosions, BIGGER explosions, and all-out-war). She's the best girlfriend that I could ever ask for (better, actually). I mean, how many girls would let their guys go on and on about a science-fiction work (that THEY are writing) based off a video game where you shoot aliens all freakin' day long? :) Thank you Denali, for everything. I hope you're still putting up with me by the time I finish the sequel. :)

>And to those reading, I'm reminded of a quote: "Behind every great man, there's a woman rolling her eyes, folks." I don't know about the "great" part...but I bet she's rolling her eyes and sighing by now. ;) Thank you, Jim Carrey.<br>Oh, and something she's been trying to get me to admit for months: she was also the inspiration for a certain female Spartan with a spitfire attitude and a dangerous love for Energy Swords. Compassionate, yet solid; moral and convicted; quick on her feet and ready to go. Ladies and gentlemen: Victoria Small.

**\*\*Samson00 -\*\*** Also a name that everyone who enjoyed this story should know. He started reading just a little over twenty chapters into it, and has been literally vital in keeping this story going since then. Anything I ever needed, he was ready to go, from proofreading (not just for spelling or grammar, but for content as well, to tell me when I'd lost my mind and needed change some things. :) hehehe) to throwing names out for the Sangheili that appear in **\*\*The Last Stand\*\*** (that's right. If you like Ahrmonro or U'svere, you know who to thank). And, perhaps his greatest (and certainly most time-consuming) contribution: the Atonement of Reach. I may have painted the picture for all of you, but he painted it for me first. The pulse, the giant MAC Gun (before we realized that Halopedia lied, lol), the ship's armament, complement, and makeup...everything awesome that came from the Atonement (including its freakin' NAME) were courtesy of **\*\*Samson00\*\***. Since then, he's helped me come up with some killer fight-scenes, work to incorporate Nova Company after I sprung their appearance on him and the rest of you, fix the kinks in the space-section (I am not without my flawed ideas, lol), and now

he's helping me with the beginnings of **\*\*Hell On Earth\*\***. And Jake, I apologize: I'm SURE I left out things that I didn't remember...but know that it is all appreciated, and that I couldn't have done it without you. Thanks.

>Oh yeah, before I forget: any of you who likes Samuel "Goliath" King: this is him, in the flesh. He's a born leader with a long fuse (something that's proven invaluable with the members of Zulu Company) and a "can-do", "let's go" attitude...this is something that he needed when working with me, even more so than Samuel needed it.  
;)<p>

**\*\*Gormanuyai -\*\*** Everyone reading: meet Blaine Everson. Not down to a "T", as he's one of the characters that changed a little over the course of the story, but the inspiration for the Covie-kicking character that is now associated with two things: a Gravity Hammer and the "Hunter-toss." Ironically, he hated (and probably still hates it...he hasn't told me in a while) the Gravity Hammer, but I insisted that I needed someone to wield the giant, Covenant bludgeon. And who better than a half-Cyborg Spartan with a super-powered upper-body and a bad attitude? That being said, Gormanuyai helped me a lot early on in **\*\*The Last Stand\*\***, including in helping me with the details of their training program (time spent, age taken, where, when, etc), and even helping come up with the company name and the title of the book. In all these things, he was the greatest of assets to me in starting this book, and I owe him a great deal. Later on, school and the like served to keep him busy, and his help slowed down a little bit (about the time that Samson00 came in, thankfully), but he still managed to be my greatest critic and to keep my head from getting too big over the props and compliments that chapters received. It might be because he's known me for so long that he can tell you all (and me) when I'm slacking off and need to get my head back in the game.

>He's in the Navy now, in training to serve the United States, and as his friend since we were freakin' six years old, I can say that I am proud to have grown up with him. He's got some great ideas of his own, if he'd just sit down and put them on paper. ;) So, whenever you get a chance to read through it: thanks Casey. It's been a blast, and you helped set the foundation for something that (while it needs a lot of work) I'm proud to have worked on.<p>

**\*\*Benaia Dre -\*\*** Gormanuyai's older brother, and a person to whom I owe a lot of early proofing before I began to bother Samson on a constant, never-ending basis. He was there for me to bounce ideas off of and to do a better-than-fair amount of spelling and grammar checking that Microsoft Word elects not to. ;) Unfortunately, as it often does, life kind of got in the way and between two colleges and God-only-knows how many jobs, he's a little busy for me to bother with 8,000 word chapters nowadays. :) But I do appreciate the help I got, and at the time, the help was the most important thing I could get. Thanks a lot, Cory. Don't work too hard, man. ;)

**\*\*Bubbles -\*\*** A slacker (!) who just started reading recently. ;) She is to Samson what 1 way ticket is to me. I can only imagine her utter and complete disgust when the four of us would get together for pizza and talk about my book for 45 minutes to an hour and she would simply look at us and nod intermittently. But she finally took it upon herself to read through this (exceedingly long) story and figure out what in God's good name we were rambling on about. ;) She's given me feedback and I know Samson has talked with her some about both this story and the sequel, and it was great to have someone read through the story who didn't know what was coming and then talk about it in

more than a series of reviews. Now whenever I let my narcissistic tendencies get out of hand and start talking about my book, she can do more than follow along; she can start throwing out her own ideas and comments. So thank you, Kristi, for all of that. And...more than anything I think, thank for you for not killing me due to the massive amount of time your boyfriend spends proofreading and working on my book instead of bothering you. ;)

**\*\*Jeremiah Rogers -\*\*** For the record: I hate you. ;) No, for anyone who has no freakin' clue who I'm talking to: this is my college roommate and a friend from high school. He's done what some would consider to be a negligible amount for this story...and they'd be right, except for one very important thing that he did help me with that I'll go into in just a second here. I've bounced a few ideas off of him; he's given me names for most of Nova Company (and the Elite, Breka), and what is most likely his most important contribution (apart from distracting me from the story to play X-Box Live) is that he helped me to fix a major time-span error at the end of **\*\*The Last Stand\*\***. It's nothing that I want to go into, but the ending time of Halo 3, combined with the ending of my first space segment caused a little bit of a bump. Still, we got it ironed out, and all is well. So thanks, Jonathon. But if you ever post again, I will have to kill you. ;) Bye...

**\*\*My Family\*\*** - Specifically my parents, for giving me a Dell computer that served as the medium for this story. There's no way that the days (literally days) spent typing this could have been done on a desktop in the computer room at home or the library here at Miami. More than that, I appreciate their cooperation upon my making them promise not to read this, as I still maintain that a book by Crichton or King would be a better use of their time. So, while this really was my project, whatever (rather limited) talent I've developed really had to come from somewhere. ;)

**\*\*armoured-blade\*\***, **\*\*Spartan Ophir 06 -\*\*** Two reviewers that have both had the occasion to read a message or e-mail asking them to waste their lives proofreading a chapter for me, of which both have kindly accepted. Normally, I'm not a fan of sending things out to anyone I don't know, but sometimes life gets in the way of the few people (or single person, lol) in charge of proofing for me. So I figured that they both deserved special attention.

**\*\*Bungie & Microsoft\*\*** - For creating a truly incredible trilogy of FPS video games with a storyline that somehow managed to leave so much to the imagination, all the while leaving very little to be desired. As an avid enjoyer of the games and the books, I'm honored to have been able to take what they had already developed and in some way make it my own. So thank you to those who worked to get the story of the Master Chief and the Covenant into our hands!

**\*\*FanFiction -\*\*** Obviously, for being an open public forum where aspiring writers and readers alike can come to critique and enjoy the works of others, free of charge. And how many entities can honestly use that word "free" anymore?

Lastly, I'd like to thank anyone and everyone who has taken the time to read through this story, and especially anyone who was kind enough to leave me their reviews of the chapters. It's because of the input that I recieved that I've been able to alter the story slightly in places and it's because of them that I realized how well this story

was received.

And it's because of that that I've decided to write the sequel.

So, to all of you who read, to all of you who took the time to tell me what you liked, what you thought was a little off, what you wanted to see changed, and what you flat-out couldn't stand: thank you. It's because of the support and the sheer number of people telling me that they were interested that I continued to write this story and eventually arrived at the ending that I wanted to write from the start. It's been a really wild ride, and I couldn't have done it without the constant help.

And, with that, I end **\*\*Zulu Company: The Last Stand\*\***. I hope you've all enjoyed it, and I'll see you when I post **\*\*Hell On Earth\*\***!

- AJ (Raptor)

End  
file.